

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF COMEDY IN THE AGE OF EMPIRE

Edited by Matthew Kaiser



**A CULTURAL HISTORY
OF COMEDY**

VOLUME 5

A Cultural History of Comedy

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SERIES PREFACE

One of the best places to look for the deep-lying thoughts, feelings, and presumptions of a society is in its comedy. Any historical text rewards informed study for the insights into sociocultural contexts that reside sometimes invisibly in and between its lines. Texts associated with comedy and the comic go that step deeper by virtue of being built upon a generic presumption of insider status.

Umberto Eco, the writer, philosopher, and semiotician, intimated as much in a 1980 essay¹ when he pointed out that, unlike tragedy, comedy assumes a high conspiratorial stance toward the society it renders. According to Eco, the tragic journeys of, say, Orestes and Madame Bovary, may derive from societies differing to some extent from our own, but the codified injunctions regarding retribution and adultery are made eminently clear as part and parcel of their textual worlds. In comic texts, on the other hand, we encounter the fact that comedy does not always travel well, and “without a degree in classics we don’t know exactly why the Socrates of Aristophanes should make us laugh” (1995: 270). Eco concludes that, whereas tragedy will acknowledge the social rule being violated and, indeed, examine its validity, “comic works take the rule for granted, and don’t bother to restate it” (1995: 272). Building upon this principle, comedy trades on that within society which needs no introduction—it takes as given the rules and structures it breaks, varies, and usually reaffirms. A probing of the comic practices of other times and places, with a critical light shone on their assumptions by the many contributors assembled in these volumes, stands to expose considerable tensions between individuals and society. A cultural history of comedy, then, promises wide-ranging insight through the examination of both how it presents experience on the ground, and what further it reveals about what goes without saying in the everyday life beneath it.

At best comedy identifies itself only in soft focus. The six volumes of this series provide extensive evidence that there is little enough basis for generalization about comedy as to render anything one might hope to claim panoramically about it all but meaningless. Each of the volumes serves to impress how differently comedy has been defined, idealized, practiced, and received over the past few thousand years. As a proto-genre, it arose in and through Greek and Roman cultures in the crucible of the dawning European civilization we have come to call Antiquity. Its subsequent invocation as a descriptor for other types of literature and performance retains an inescapably western orientation, even though formal features associated with comedy—notably, playful or humorous registers—can be found in ancient texts from around the world. While reference to texts and thought beyond western contexts appear occasionally in these volumes, the prevailing focus remains within such frames of reference.

We have looked to organize our Cultural History of Comedy into eight themes across the six volumes, both for manageability and to suit readers pursuing circumscribed perspectives. Each volume begins with an introduction that aims to orient the reader in period and context. Three of the themes—Form, Theory, and Praxis—might appear in many a broad treatment of art as a cultural object of study, with three more—Identity, Politics and Power, and Ethics—representing its social implications and supplying lines of inquiry relevant to studies in other subjects, as well. The rooting of human experience in the Body has garnered increased attention over the past half century and more, and on several levels remains of particular interest to a vision of the world through comedy. Laughter, of course, is a theme that appears the most viable throughline for comedy, all but definitive of the transaction between comic text and spectator/reader.

The corpus of comedy-related thought and practice is sprawling and ever-expanding, and so, to some extent, each of the contributors has customized an approach to the theme according to their scholarly spheres. We have, in any case, tried to ensure that the fifty-four essays contained in these volumes (eight themed essays plus an introduction in each one) offer themselves accessibly to more than a strictly academic readership. In fact, you will find herein a range of orientations and writing styles not limited to any given band of conventional scholarly approach. Whatever the cause or nature of any given reader's interest, there are intriguing and, indeed, revealing times ahead within the pages of this and the other volumes.

Andrew McConnell Stott and Eric Weitz, General Editors

Introduction

Comic Frames in the Age of Empire

MATTHEW KAISER

THE WANDERING CLOWN

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle floated the theory that the origin of Greek comedy—the word “comedy” itself—can be traced to itinerant clowns venturing beyond city limits to outlying villages. Dorians “in the Peloponnese,” Aristotle explained, “call villages *kōmai*, while the Athenians call them *dēmoi*; their contention is that comic performers [*kōmōdoī*] got their name not from revelling [*kōmazein*] but from wandering through villages when banned from the city” (1995: 37). The *Poetics* constitutes the world’s first work of literary criticism; it contains the first attempt at a cultural history of comedy. If one buys the wandering-clown theory, then comedy emerged from “out-of-placeness,” from the collision or awkward intersection of incommensurate worlds. It is not the content of the comedian’s act, his “revelling,” that is “comical” in the modern sense of the word. Rather, it is his misplaced presence. The sight of a vagrant entertainer from the city, on foot or mounted on a donkey, descending a hill, or rounding a bend, must have elicited chuckles from country folk. A nuisance and a delight, another mouth to feed, this outcast comedian—so different than other intruders, than soldiers, say, or highwaymen, or peddlers—was a contradiction in terms. A friendly alien, a harmless outlaw, he blurred and reinforced cultural and geographic divisions between city and village, center and periphery. His songs celebrated his liminality, his nimble navigation of contradiction.

No wonder comedy as a historical (and ideological) phenomenon has proven—in the words of Samuel Johnson—so “unpropitious to definers”

(1825: 19), to the cartographers and boundary-makers of culture. “Don’t fence me in!” comedy warns its critics. Most appear to have listened. “There has been precious little agreement,” literary historian Paul Lauter admits, “about the nature of comedy itself” (1964: xv). If comedy, Matthew Bevis observes, resists being “pin[ned] down to a specific location,” that is because the “comic imagination,” “like a pun, . . . teases doubleness from singularity” (2013: 7). It destabilizes the map, the very idea of maps. “The comic,” Andrew Stott explains, “can be thought of as a means of opening up the possibility of multiple perspectives, as each concept culturally established as orthodox simultaneously presents itself for the possibility of comic subversion, a silent but parallel conversation that might erupt at any moment” (2005: 8–9). “The essence of all jokes,” Ralph Waldo Emerson asserts, indeed, “of all comedy, seems to be an honest or well-intended halfness,” that is, a willingness “to look . . . at every object in existence *aloof*” (1876: 139–40), as if one were straddling two orders of reality, committed to neither.

Even Aristotle himself, twenty-two centuries dead, could not escape the double vision of the wandering clown. In the 1870s, Oscar Wilde journeyed in the opposite direction of Aristotle’s itinerant entertainer, from province to metropole, from Irish periphery to London center. Around him the map of empire had colored whole continents pink. “A map of the world that does not include Utopia,” Wilde declared in “The Soul of Man under Socialism” (1891), “is not worth even glancing at” (2007b: 247). Like all anti-cartographic thinkers, or boundary-crossers, Wilde spoke deftly out of both sides of his mouth. About Aristotle’s *Poetics*, he had this to say: “It is absolutely perfect” and “it is badly written” (2007a: 139). A proud Irishman and ambivalent British subject, Wilde understood that the very ground on which he stood was saturated with imperial power. A brilliant comedian, he understood, too, the epistemological delight and psychological relief that audiences experience when that ground is yanked from beneath their feet, suspending their minds momentarily in indeterminacy and disorientation. “The well-bred contradict other people,” Wilde explained in 1894: “the wise contradict themselves” (1969b: 433).

The trope of the wandering clown—agent, celebrant, spokesperson, or shameless exploiter of the world’s contradictions—is one of several possible frames that we might use to make sense of comedy in the Age of Empire. We’ll consider alternative frames a little later, in this introduction as well as in the chapters that follow. Here, however, comedy can be seen as a cognitive and emotional coping mechanism enabling metropolitan and colonial populations to survive or thrive in a world in flux. Given the momentous cultural changes that occurred in the decades spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—shifting borders, socioeconomic upheaval, unprecedented overseas expansion by the “Great Powers” of Europe and, later, by the United States—

the age was uniquely conducive to comedy. It was conducive not because empire is comical, but because the logic of modern empire is structured by unsustainable hence comedically exploitable contradictions. The years from 1800 to 1920 are marked by fraught cultural encounters, some genocidal, between settlers and indigenous peoples; deepening class tensions and mass migration spurred by uneven economic growth, industrialization, urbanization, and over-population; the political, professional, and cultural ascendancy of the middle classes and the emergence of modern consumer society and liberal democracy; increased race-consciousness on the part of Western populations and a concomitant rise in ethnic nationalism, eugenic ideology, and biological determinism; scientific and technological innovation, including “rapid advances in the means and reliability



FIGURE 0.1: Editorial cartoon “The White (?) Man’s Burden” by William H. Walker, *Life*, 1899. Photo by Stock Montage / Contributor / Getty Images.

of communication” and “the development of steamships, railways, postal services, and telegraphs” (Porter 1999: 6–7); “intense rivalry among the European powers during the Scramble for [or Partition of] Africa and large portions of Asia and the South Pacific” (Brantlinger 1988: ix); increasingly destructive technologies of warfare and the globalization of total war; and the daunting administrative and strategic-planning challenge of reshaping the world, reengineering human life itself, in the name of economic development, national security, and the purported superiority of Western civilization (Porter 1999: 15–19). Any historical period this buffeted by change and transformation, any world turned this upside-down, is ripe for clowning. A famous 1899 political cartoon by William H. Walker in *Life* magazine captures the topsy-turvy nature of the historical moment; and it does so in the context of American and European imperialism and hypocrisy. Titled “The White (?) Man’s Burden,” the cartoon flips Rudyard Kipling’s poetic script, depicting the weight of Western imperialism as crushing the bodies of conquered peoples, who march across an inhospitable landscape and into an uncertain future doubled over in pain and despair, beasts of burden beneath comically oversized imperial masters: gangly Uncle Sam on the shoulders of the diminutive Philippines, rotund John Bull atop a turbaned India, martial Germany and France on the bent backs of Africa.

Metropolitan and colonial literary works and popular entertainments of the period teem with modern equivalents of the wandering clown: tricksters, ironists, humorists, sassy music-hall celebrities, and those who dwell, like William Makepeace Thackeray’s Barry Lyndon or Mark Twain’s Huck Finn, or like Wilde’s own carefully curated public persona, in contradiction and disorientation. These figures flit or stumble or creep across the shifting cultural landscapes of the period: shadows cast by modernity, by the unmaking and remaking of the world. Not all wandering clowns, however, are skeptical of or hostile to the imperial project or to global capitalism. Where Wilde optimistically declares that the “cultivation” of “cosmopolitan” pluralism, of a comedic multiplicity of perspective, “will annihilate race-prejudices” (2007a: 202–3) and purge the Western mind of tribalism, other comic writers and entertainers from the period deftly and eagerly exploit comic indeterminacy for conservative, normative, or nationalist ends. Liminality cuts both ways; comic subversion is a transideological phenomenon. As global capitalism reshapes agrarian, pre-industrial, and non-Western cultures and communities, and as an increasingly interconnected world contracts, these liminal figures—whatever their politics—venture further afield, the “periphery” having expanded in the Western imagination to encompass new frontiers, overseas territories, trade routes, buffer zones, semiautonomous client-states, international commercial enterprises, and other “Imperial assets” (Porter 1999: 5). Some of these frontiers, Edward Said reminds us, the ideological construct known as “the

Orient,” for instance, are fantastical in nature and “half-imagined”: “a theatrical stage affixed to Europe” (1994: 63). Peachey Carnehan and Daniel Dravot come immediately to mind. British con artists, Orientalist buffoons, and would-be tyrants, they venture “beyond the Border” and over the Khyber Pass in Kipling’s short story “The Man who would be King” (1888), disguised as Asian merchants, a “mad priest” and his servant, selling “whirligigs” (1908: 220, 218). Their plan is to conquer Kafiristan and to install themselves as absolute rulers. Only Peachey returns to British India alive, crucified, his face disfigured, by his former subjects. Or recall Bonaparte Blenkins in Olive Schreiner’s novel *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), another imperial grifter, who appears one afternoon on a Boer farm, unsettling the settlers. A dissolute Irishman with a “pendulous red nose” (1992: 17), he claims not only to “have been in every country in the world” (1992: 25), but to be related to both Napoleon Bonaparte and Queen Victoria. Here, the non-Western world, the South, the East, serves as a comic stage on which Kipling and Schreiner, respectively, lampoon the most easily condemnable expressions of cultural myopia and imperial hubris.

It would be a mistake, however, to conceive of the wandering clown too narrowly as an actual itinerant or raggedy jokester; nor should we view the trope of comic peripateticism or “aloofness” exclusively through the lens of geography, imperial or otherwise. A wandering clown dwells inside us all, circling our contradictions. By the early-to-mid-nineteenth century, all the world is an outlying village—even, in the case of a multiethnic megalopolis like London, the city itself. And while many people remain fixed to a single locale all their lives, all of them, to an extent, are adrift in intricate inner worlds, “in the chambers of the sea,” as Prufrock described them (Eliot 1978: 7). The winding road once traveled by Aristotle’s *kōmōdoi* has been internalized in the modern age, the ancient tension between town and country playing out, not only on a global scale in the tension between metropole and province, but more abstractly in “tensions between the individual and the mass, the inner and the outer, the private and the public, . . . idealism and realism,” the past and the future, the conscious and the unconscious (Romanska and Ackerman 2017: 181, 191). These are the incommensurate worlds we now straddle. The contradictions that structure modern identity—the sociocultural fault lines within subjectivity—are the stuff now of comedy. The apocryphal Age of Heroes, of moral and hierarchical clarity, has long since given way to the Age of Clowns, to the epistemological elasticity and moral relativism characteristic of modernity, or what Henry James punningly dubbed “the Awkward Age,” when Western bourgeois society, like an unripe debutante, comes clumsily of age. “I want a hero,” Byron declares, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, in the first Canto of *Don Juan* (1819): “When every year and month sends forth a new one,/ Till, after cloying the gazettes with cant,/ The age discovers he is not the true one” (1839: 53). Byron plucks his satiric anti-hero, “our ancient

friend Don Juan,” from the clown-world of “the pantomime” (1839: 53). Nearly a century later, on the eve of the First World War, T. S. Eliot arrives at much the same tragicomic conclusion, namely, that modern man is a laughable creature adrift in a disorienting and relativistic world: “I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;/ Am an attendant lord, . . . At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—/ Almost, at times, the Fool” (1978: 7). Think of the wandering clown, then, as a metaphor not only for comic indeterminacy or for what Emerson called “halfness,” but for the disorientation and contradiction intrinsic to modern consciousness.

By now it should be apparent that this cultural history of comedy has strayed quite far from what is customarily understood by “comedy”: humorous plays for the stage, or, as the lexicographically inclined Johnson described them, “*such a dramattick representation of human life, as may excite mirth*” (1825: 20). But there is method to our meandering, for it reflects the increasingly baggy nature of the concept of “comedy” in the period under review, its gradual decoupling from the literary arts, and its eventual conflation in the popular imagination with humorous phenomena more generally, with amusement, hilarity, irony, nonsense, silliness, cleverness, and topsy-turvydom. This is not to say that stage comedies or traditional comic plots fell out of favor with audiences in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They did not. Nor does it mean that nineteenth-century critics cease making distinctions of any kind among various humorous or comical phenomena. What it does mean, however, is that by the mid-nineteenth century the *idea* of comedy had expanded to encompass almost everything that causes, in Lauter’s words, “a psycho-physical phenomenon, laughter” (1964: xviii). Where eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century theorists of comedy viewed it primarily as an aesthetic category or literary form, as the century progressed the study of comedy (and humor) merged with and became subsumed in the multidisciplinary study of laughter: a fertile academic field in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and one which attracted psychologists, sociologists, evolutionary biologists, theologians, and later psychoanalysts, among others, who seized upon the laugh impulse as a key to unlocking the mysteries of the human mind. William Hazlitt’s 1819 lectures on wit and humor, for example, are nostalgically fixated, like so many critical treatments of comedy from the early decades of the century on seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “comic writers” (1819: 1). Hazlitt includes three lectures on the English dramatists, one on periodical essayists, one on eighteenth-century novelists, and one on William Hogarth’s satirical paintings, which he compares favorably to works of literature: “Other pictures we see, Hogarth’s we read” (1819: 267). By contrast, in 1877, Victorian novelist George Meredith uses the occasion of an essay on dramatic comedy to pivot abruptly into a dissertation on the civilizing powers of what he calls “the Comic spirit” (1905: 13), which he defines vaguely as a liberal-bourgeois state

of mind, an expression of cultural and intellectual refinement, rather than an aesthetic practice or literary mode. For idealistic Meredith, comedy is the very essence of civilization; as such, it constitutes the salvation of the human race. By 1900, French philosopher Henri Bergson has purged comedy almost entirely of its literariness, peppering his sociological analysis of comic laughter with passing references merely to Molière, Cervantes, and Jerome K. Jerome. For Bergson, the comic constitutes a social reaction to the changes wrought on the human body and psyche by mechanization and automation. Where comedy once referred exclusively to the *art* of inducing laughter, it now refers to the *logic* of laughter itself, to its complex cultural and cognitive mechanisms, to the individual's intellectual "capacity for" comic "perception" (Wickberg 1998: 9). Like the related concept of the "sense of humor," the comic impulse, Daniel Wickberg explains, "suggests both a deep interiority capable of perceiving incongruities and a capacity for infinite adaptation to the circumstances of social life" (1998: 9). It is Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard, however, who, in 1846, plucks the concept of comedy most dramatically from the discursive confines of drama and repositions it at the heart of his existential philosophy. As the concept of comedy becomes less determinate, it becomes more theoretically fecund. According to Kierkegaard, modern consciousness is structured by contradiction, by out-of-placeness. He defines comedy as the *painless* experience of the disorientation intrinsic to subjectivity, when we wander our inner landscape, for example, in whimsical fashion like Lewis Carroll's Alice, rather than in a state of blind despair, like Sophocles's Oedipus or like the disoriented speaker in Robert Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" (1855). "The matter is quite simple," Kierkegaard writes:

The comical is present in every stage of life (only that the relative positions are different), for wherever there is life, there is contradiction, and wherever there is contradiction, the comical is present. The tragic and the comic are the same, in so far as both are based on contradiction; but *the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction.*

—[1846] 1941: 459

Think of the comic impulse, then, at least in the historical and cultural context of the Age of Empire, not merely as a moral or social corrective to alienating or unnatural aspects of modern life, but as a therapeutic and self-reflective means of gaining perspective on the contradictory demands placed on the modern individual by an increasingly complex society. Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman claim that "the Victorian era . . . is not generally considered to be remarkable for comedy, at least not until the last decades of the century" (2017: 179). Their claim is true insofar as we limit our definition of comedy to dramatic texts. The "Comic spirit," however, to use Meredith's more amorphous

terminology, flourished throughout the period. In the eyes of some, in fact, comedy made the world go round. It made the modern “self” make sense. When Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson—who, like Wilde and Kipling, knew what it was to feel suspended between cultures—found himself torn philosophically between the disenchanting scientism of the age and his own idealism, or what he called “a ruddier presentation of the sum of man’s experience” (2018: 19), he made a virtue of his disorientation. “There are moments,” he asserts, “when the mind refuses to be satisfied with evolution”: “The mood is brought about by laughter at the humorous side of life, as when, abstracting ourselves from earth, we imagine people plodding on foot, or seated in ships and speedy trains, with the planet all the while whirling in the opposite direction, so that, for all their hurry, they travel back-foremost through the universe of space” (2018: 19). For Stevenson, the Earth is a peripatetic trickster turning on its axis, our minds momentarily escaping its gravitational field, suspended between the divergent motions of biological evolution and planetary revolution, progress and regress. Likewise, Emily Dickinson, another literary star-gazer, whom Constance Rourke classifies as “not only a lyric poet,” but “in a profound sense a comic poet” (2004: 209), captures the comedy inherent in the human condition with her own wandering-planet metaphor. Manmade categories such as racial and national identity, which “fix” us tragically in place, are rendered ephemeral, relative, by the universal and healing motions of cosmic (and comic) time. Here, Dickinson dismisses ethnic and cultural differences as mere tricks of a rising or setting sun:

Who is the East?
 The Yellow Man
 Who may be Purple if He can
 That carries in the Sun.

Who is the West?
 The Purple Man
 Who may be Yellow if He can
 That lets Him out again.

—1960: 473

Lest we forget that comedy has an ugly side, a side so sprawling, in fact, that it spans half the globe, let’s return to London, specifically to Hyde Park in 1851, where the Crystal Palace Exhibition is in full swing, and where we have an opportunity to observe comedy at its most petty, reactive, and racially paranoid. For every Dickinson or Stevenson, whose flavor of comedy is self-deprecating and culturally inclusive, and who discovered new ethical perspectives in their comic disorientation, there was a seasoned and coldblooded

satirist like illustrator Thomas Onwhyn (c. 1811–86), whom Charles Dickens is said to have despised. Adept at weaponizing comedy, Onwhyn exploited for nationalist and demagogic ends the cultural anxieties unleashed by the blurring of metropole and province, core and periphery. There are few symbols of British imperialism in the nineteenth century more potent or sublime than the aforementioned Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, in which Britain's manufacturing and technological might was put on full display for the world to see within walls of glass, alongside exhibits featuring British colonies and assorted Orientalist paraphernalia, which, Jeffrey Auerbach notes, "were given a prime location near the intersection of the nave and the transept, at the very centre of the exhibition building" (2015: 113). Geoffrey Cantor provides a compelling account of how, in the months leading up to the Exhibition, the British press stoked fears of a foreign invasion of London by tourists, "with one source estimating that a million foreigners would descend on London, together with another million from Scotland, Ireland, and the provinces" (2011: 21). Despite the fact that the foreign visitors during the Exhibition's six-month run numbered only between 60,000 and 100,000, Onwhyn could not resist exploiting for comic effect his countrymen's fear of multiculturalism and internationalism. His popular 1851 pamphlet, *Mr. and Mrs. John Brown's Visit to London to see the Grand Exposition of All Nations*, was subtitled: "How they were astonished at its Wonders!!, Inconvenienced by the Crowds, & frightened out of their Wits by the Foreigners." In frame after frame, Onwhyn tells the same xenophobic joke. The provincial Browns and their two small children attempt, with awkward politeness, to mask their terror and confusion in the presence of thousands of ethnic "Others," primarily males: Russians, Native Americans, East Asians, Spaniards, Frenchmen, Arabs, Africans, Turks, and even a party of barefoot natives from the Cannibal Islands, all of whom seem more at ease in the cosmopolitan setting of London than do the Browns, who, at one point, "oppressed with the heat," erect with their umbrella "an Impromptu Wigwam" (1851: n.p.) in a defensive attempt at assimilation. The foreigners take inordinate interest—in one case, a gustatory interest—in the Browns' bashful offspring. As the party of cannibals enjoy bowls of "soup à la Hottentot" at a refreshment stand, they eye young Johnny, offering his parents "a price for him" (1851: n.p.). In another cartoon, a hirsute Cossack pinches little Anna Maria on the cheek, while "some Negroes exhibit their ivories to little Johnny" (1851: n.p.). It is Onwhyn's depiction of the Browns' visit to a theater, however, that elevates his pamphlet to the level of imperial metacomedy, for the grinning, ethnically exaggerated, countenances in the audience suggest that the play being viewed is a comedy. Here, the uncomfortable proximity of the racially Othered periphery threatens the integrity of the beleaguered English core, embodied by the Browns' protective efforts to shield their children from the gaze of Arabs and Africans. The typical



FIGURE 0.2: “The Browns erect an impromptu wigwam,” from Thomas Onwhyn’s *Mr. and Mrs. John Brown’s Visit to London to see the Grand Exposition of All Nations*, 1851. Photo by Hulton Archive / Getty Images.

English provincial, Onwhyn suggests, is more alienated and less empowered by the British Empire than are Britain’s foreign trading partners or even its subjugated colonial populations, who are blissfully at home *everywhere*, and who have the funds to travel to London in style, wigwams in tow, while the Browns are forced to spend the night in a coach, unable to find a hotel room. At the metropolitan heart of empire, Onwhyn jokes, sits not mighty Britannia, with trident and lion, but a family of disoriented bumpkins. That the ethnically diverse audience has trained their opera glasses and smiles of comic anticipation on *us*, the illustration’s viewers, places the pamphlet’s readers in the same self-conscious predicament as the Browns.



FIGURE 0.3: “Mr. and Mrs. Brown visit the theatre during the Great Exhibition” by Thomas Onwhyn, 1851. Photo by Hulton Archive / Stringer / Getty Images.

THE ABSURD PHALLUS

There is another—more bodily—theory of the origin of comedy, popular among turn-of-the-century classicists and anthropologists, which traces it to Greek fertility rites and celebrations of vegetable growth, to the physical excitement inspired in agrarian communities by the fecundity of the natural

world. According to Francis Macdonald Cornford (1874–1943), who wrote on the eve of the First World War, comedy—and note his choice of verb here—“sprang up and took shape” in “Dionysiac or Phallic ritual . . . in honour of the God of Wine, with processions and dances of wild disorder and drunken licence” (1914: 3). He imagines some “rustic poet breaking out, when the new wine and the general excitement had gone to his head, into satirical sallies and buffooneries, taken up with shouts of laughter by the crowd of reeling revellers” (1914: 3). Cornford’s colorful account of the birth of comedy no doubt put smiles on the faces of his Cambridge undergraduates, many of whom, in a matter of months or years, would be sent to the trenches. Likewise, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche traces the origin of Greek comedy to the figure of the satyr: “the harbinger of wisdom from the very breast of nature, a symbol of nature’s sexual omnipotence, which the Greeks were accustomed to consider[] with respectful astonishment” (1993: 40). The phallic-ritual theory of comedy, as I am calling it, anticipates Northrop Frye’s alignment of comedy with “the mythos of spring” (1957: 163) and his famous characterization of Shakespearean romantic comedy as “the drama of the green world, its plot being assimilated to the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land” (1957: 182). It also anticipates, in some ways, Mikhail Bakhtin’s linkage of the comic worldview to “carnavalesque” (1984: 15) folk culture with its bawdy celebration of “the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs” (1984: 21), and to the logic of “grotesque realism” more generally, with “its unifying, degrading, uncrowning, and simultaneously regenerating functions” (1984: 23). It is no coincidence that the phallic-ritual theory of comedy flourished during the New Imperialism, from the 1880s through the First World War, when Western powers were engaged in fierce competition for control of the colonial “green” world, especially in the context of the Partition of Africa. British classicists dutifully Hellenized their countrymen’s imperial impulses, finding antecedents in the ancient world, presenting Great Britain as the cultural progeny of Greece. Victorian ethnologist Robert Knox claimed that the Saxon race “was early in Greece” and contributed “to the formation of the noblest of all men—the statesmen, poets, sculptors, mathematicians, metaphysicians, historians of ancient Greece” (1850: 41). The proponents of empire discovered in the Greeks their ideal masculine selves unsullied by modernity: a phallic pastoralism. In the logic of comedy, empire caught a glimpse of its own boyish wonder at a world ripe for plucking.

While Priapus plays a starring role in this comic theory, the ritual function of comedy, Nietzsche reminds us, is not the promotion of drunkenness or atavistic surrender to the monstrous virility of “authentic, natural truth” (1993: 41). Rather, comedy has a conservative and cathartic ritual function: namely, to help participants manage primal emotion, overcome their frenzy-disgust by

sublimating their astonishment at nature's grotesque potency into artistic expression. Thus, Nietzsche defines comedy as "the artistic release from the repulsion of the absurd" (1993: 40). Comedy enables us, according to this theory, to process and find joy in the disconcerting absurdity of natural instinct, in the unruliness of bodies. To put it bluntly: nature whips it out; celebrants overcome their astonishment through laughter. This is the ritual work that comedy is said to perform. Whether the Greeks experienced any of this is beside the point, for the ancient world functions in this scenario as a screen, as do Bakhtin's medieval "folk," on which nineteenth-century classicists, or twentieth-century literary critics, project unconscious impulses. That said, the phallic-ritual theory of comedy proved quite popular in twentieth-century academic circles. One can see it operating at a relatively high level, for instance, in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), in their novel reading of Sigmund Freud's case studies on hysteria, in which sexually repressed (or heterosexuality-averse) young women overcome, with Freud's avuncular assistance, "their phobic alienation" from their bodies, their repulsion of sex, through "cathartic laughter," "salvaging torn shreds of carnival from their . . . bourgeois unconscious" (1986: 171). Stallybrass and White portray Freud as a turn-of-the-century phallic comedian, as the chief priest in the medical equivalent of a Dionysian procession: "It appears that Freud's therapeutic project was simply the reinflection of this grotesque material into comic form," with his hysteric patients, they add, "privately enact[ing]" in their psyches "the battle between Carnival and Lent" (1986: 171, 184).

Proponents of the phallic-ritual theory of comedy will point to the prevalence of marriage plots in Roman and early modern dramatic comedy, indeed, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century stage comedy; they will point to comedy's appetite for sexual frustration, for genital humor, for reluctant girls wooed by overeager boys, whose dogged labors are rewarded in the end with weddings, with rituals of reconciliation. Some critics, in fact, claim that comedy is an inherently male and youthful cultural phenomenon, an expression of civilizational pubescence. Frye makes the sweeping assertion that "the comic dramatist as a rule writes for the younger men in his audience, and the older members of almost any society are apt to feel that comedy has something subversive about it" (1957: 164), the implication being that the cultural function of comedy is to accommodate restive male sexuality, to reconcile through laughter its potentially disruptive or antisocial presence with sociality itself. Comedy, then, is a journey of phallic entitlement from absurdity to harmony, from hormonal eruptions of spring to matrimonial harvest. Male awkwardness and sexual aggression are socialized in comedy, pacified through laughter, the phallus simultaneously flattered and forgiven for being such a divine troublemaker. By the dawn of the nineteenth century, the phallus had long since abandoned its pretension to divinity, the Marquis de Sade, just to be sure,

turning it into a symbol of atheistic freedom; even so, in certain nineteenth-century erotic and pornographic texts, in Wilde's *Teleny* (1893), for instance, as well as in the poetry of Walt Whitman, the phallus remains sheathed in mystical and quasi-metaphysical metaphor.

On occasion, however, the old comic trope of the sacred phallus makes an appearance—even if only obliquely—in nineteenth-century literary and folkloric representations of sacred fools. When the Austro-Ukrainian novelist Leopold von Sacher-Masoch compiled his 1891 volume of Jewish folktales, *Jüdisches Leben in Wort und Bild (Jewish Life in Words and Pictures)*, he included a humorous tale from northern Germany, “The Meal of the Pious,” which recounts the adventures of Adolf Tigerson, “the official clown of the Jewish community in Lindenberg” (2002: 35). Tigerson straddles the line between sacred and secular comedic realms. With his “gaunt” form, his “long, crooked legs,” and his “great hook nose,” he “was born to be the comic of the divine comedy,” Sacher-Masoch asserts, but he was also an adept “conjurer, singer, actor, acrobat, musician, artist, and poet” (2002: 35). When “a pretty and clever Jewish girl, Fishele Lionhead,” who happens, like Tigerson, to be “very thin,” declares “that such a ridiculous man as Adolf Tigerson could never get a wife,” the “merry wise” clown vows on the spot to marry her (2002: 35–6). His courtship strategy consists of embracing his divinely ordained role as village *putz*, publicly humiliating the girl, mercilessly mocking her appearance, and causing her to cry, but eventually inspiring her to laugh at herself. Such is the allure of the phallic clown, that “in the fall,” Sacher-Masoch writes, Adolf and Fishele “celebrated their wedding” (2002: 37). Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century humor that focuses on female desire or on female sexual frustration tends to be just as phallic in nature, insofar as it gestures to absent or inadequate phalluses. Oscar Wilde's 1883 quip about Niagara Falls, a popular American honeymoon destination, is a case in point: “Every American bride is taken there, and the sight of the stupendous waterfall must be one of the earliest, if not the keenest, disappointments in American married life” (1969a: 7).

Let's return, for a moment, to Nietzsche's definition of comedy as “the artistic release from the repulsion of the absurd”—the notion, that is, that comedy functions as a means by which we overcome our astonishment at intrusions into the social field by inappropriate or alien—usually bodily—phenomena. Focused as he is on the ancient Greeks, Nietzsche associates those intrusions with “authentic, natural truth,” with nature's flaunting of its grotesque fertility, which shatters our overly tidy worldview, “the lie of culture masquerading as the sole reality” (1993: 41). It probably goes without saying, but, to this day, natural or bodily intrusions fuel much of low comedy. Just ask anyone who has laughed at a belch or who has smiled inwardly at the sight of a plus-size jogger. But “natural” phenomena, especially in a modern context, no longer have a monopoly on absurdity. The Age of Empire, after all, is also the

age of mechanical reproduction, capitalist alienation, mass production, automation, industrial regimentation, dehumanizing bureaucracy, rampant consumerism, and those sickly, deindividuating urban crowds (*multitudes malades*) that we encounter in the works of Dickens, Baudelaire, Zola, and Gissing. In the modern age, what is most absurd is oftentimes what is most unnatural, artificial, perverse, abnormal, inorganic, and mechanical. In Nikolai Gogol's short story "The Nose" (1836), a tale of castration anxiety, a barber in St. Petersburg discovers, "to his surprise, something white" (2008: 294) in the center of his morning loaf of bread: it is a nose—"a familiar one"—the nose, it turns out, of one of his customers, "the collegiate assessor Kovalev, whom he shaved every Wednesday and Sunday" (2008: 295), and who wakes up that morning on the other side of town with "a perfectly smooth place" in lieu of a nose (2008: 297). The tale's comedy derives not only from the improbable journey undertaken by the nose, but from Kovalev's deeply middle-class response to his own bodily fragmentation: his primary concern is how his missing appendage will impact his social standing. It is the *unnaturalness* of the Russian middle-class mind, Gogol suggests, that is absurd, just as it is the unnaturalness of the Russian aristocratic body that is absurd in Ivan Goncharov's *Oblomov* (1859), in which the title character spends nearly the entire novel lounging in bed in a state of "untroubled ease" (1992: 3) surrounded by "mice and moths, and bugs" (1992: 11).

Or consider the following cartoon, which appeared in *Punch* in September 1847, and which mocks the Victorian middle-class craze for freakshows. The cartoon depicts a crowd of well-dressed men and women pushing past a handheld advertisement for a "Hirsute Boy" and into the exhibition rooms of the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, where lurid placards promise sights more hideous than a hairy child: "The Greatest Deformity In The World Within" declares one billboard; "By Far The Ugliest Biped Is Here" announces another. The joke, of course, is not on the freaks, whose exploited bodies are mercifully out of view, but on the perverse appetites of freakshow consumers. "Deformitomania" is a testament to the evolving logic of absurdity in the nineteenth century. We might even credit it with capturing allegorically the moment when laughter directed at *natural* phenomena, at ugliness, is supplanted or overtaken in the modern age by laughter directed at *unnatural* phenomena, at perverse or bizarre tastes. Bergson famously suggested that we laugh when bodies and minds behave like machines. We laugh at "*something mechanical encrusted on the living*," at "*some rigidity or other applied to the mobility of life*" (Bergson 1999: 39). Thus, modern comedy "partakes rather of the unsprightly than of the unsightly, of rigidity rather than ugliness" (1999: 31). Anxiety about the encroaching mechanization of the human mind had been percolating in philosophical circles since at least the mid-to-late-eighteenth century. In 1774, for instance, German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder warned that the Enlightenment project,



FIGURE 0.4: Cartoon depicting Victorian freakshow patrons flocking to the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, *Punch*, 1847. Photo by Whitemay / Getty Images.

“modern philosophy,” boils down to intellectual “mechanics,” wherein reason-based or rational “thoughts are *mechanically* banged into place” (2004: 50). Over a century later, Bergson’s anti-machinic theory of comedy helps us appreciate the cartoon’s humor, indeed, its place in the history of comedy, even if actual machines are nowhere to be seen. In their rigid adherence to fads, in their conformity to taste, in their compulsive race into the exhibition hall, practically trampling each other in the process, the freakshow patrons reveal themselves to be more inhuman, less connected to the world of natural feeling, than the monsters, or freaks of nature, on display. We recoil in laughter not at the ugliest biped’s unsightliness, but at the freakshow consumers’ heartless desire to behold it: their intellectual curiosity, their Enlightenment dispassion at the suffering of human specimens. As we turn our attention elsewhere, it is tempting—looking back one last time through this comic frame—to rewrite the history of comedy as the history of laughter at the absurdity of rigid things: whether it is the organic rigidity of Priapus or the inorganic rigidity of machines.

THE HAUNTED COMEDIAN

“Time,” cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson write, “is as basic a concept as we have” (1999: 139). “Yet time,” they point out, “in English and in other languages is, for the most part, not conceptualized and talked about on its own terms” (1999: 139). Instead, “most of our understanding of time is a metaphorical version of our understanding of motion in space” (1999: 139). In

other words, we use spatial metaphors to make sense of temporal phenomena. We say that yesterday is *behind us*, that we *look forward* to tomorrow. The future is *in front* of us. The past is *distant*, a *long way* off. In certain non-Western languages, however, the time-orientation metaphor is turned around, putting “the past in front of the observer and the future behind” (1999: 141). An example is Aymara, an indigenous language of the Chilean Andes, where speakers conceive of themselves as facing a ghostly, ever-present past, and as stepping backwards into an unseen future. In Aymara, dead ancestors stand before the living, specters receding slowly with each passing day. In the Western world, we experience time cognitively and linguistically as forward motion, as a march toward the future. The dead are behind us. We might conceive of the rise of historical consciousness—in particular the Romantic historicism that emerged in response to “forward-looking” (Collingwood 1994: 78) or reason-driven Enlightenment historiography—as an attempt to escape, fleetingly, modernity’s mad rush toward the future. Historical consciousness requires the cultivation of aloofness, halfness, out-of-placeness. It is the closest we come to ghost-gazing or time travel. The Age of Empire is a haunted age. Soulful, backward glances punctuate the forward motion of time. Historical consciousness is inherently comical: this straddling of worlds, chasing after ghosts, after shadows that *we* cast on the past. Marjorie Levinson calls “the old historicism” “a sort of ventriloquism—a virtuoso variety”: “The dummy really seems to speak; the ventriloquist does not move his lips” (1989: 52).

If historical consciousness in the nineteenth century is comical, then comedy in the period is in equal measure historical, haunted by its origins: whether they be in Greece, in Elizabethan England, or, as the Darwinists claimed, in the primordial brew of human evolution. Nineteenth-century comic writers looked back—anxiously, obsequiously, laughingly—at comic masters and philosophers of comedy from bygone eras, Aristotle, Villon, Cervantes, Hobbes, Congreve, Shaftesbury, Swift, and Hutcheson, idealizing or vilifying them, but viewing them all, in turn, as potential Charons to ferry us across the history of comedy. Michael Slater notes that the mid-Victorians, for instance, viewed wit as “a deeply suspect commodity,” associating it with “heartlessness,” “amorality,” and specifically with the “blasphemy” of Restoration-era comedy (2002: 224). The witty Victorian playwright Douglas Jerrold was lauded by one startled reviewer for having “followed the Congrevian wit less and nature more,” for having “looked deeper into humanity for the genuine sources of humour” (quoted in Slater 2002: 224). The sentimental middle-class humor that we associate with Dickens, and that, here, Jerrold is said to have achieved, is saturated with historical consciousness, with a sense of its own status as moral and historical corrective to the comedic sins of the past. Thomas Carlyle, a historian as well as a comic writer, credited humor with being the source of sympathy and love. In an essay on the eighteenth-century German humorist Jean Paul Friedrich

Richter, Carlyle describes Richter's humor as "the central fire that pervades and vivifies his whole being," "his inmost soul" (1885: 17): "Love, in fact, is the atmosphere he breathes in, the medium through which he looks" (1885: 18). He goes on to claim that Richter's humor is "the bloom and perfume, the purest effluence of a deep, fine and loving nature; a nature in harmony with itself, reconciled to the world and its stuntedness and contradiction, nay finding in this very contradiction new elements of beauty as well as goodness" (1885: 20). In Richter's humor, Carlyle discovered historical consciousness: a simultaneously transcendent and subjective vantage point from which to behold the vicissitudes of time, to shatter the temporal confines of his ego. Carlyle laughs himself into Richter's eighteenth-century mind. "Such laughter," he announced, "like sunshine on the deep sea, is very beautiful to me" (1993: 93).

Oscar Wilde certainly understood the haunted nature of comedy and the comical nature of historical consciousness. In "The Canterville Ghost" (1887), he introduces us to the Otis family, the epitome of American "vulgarity" and "gross materialism" (2003: 190), who move to England after purchasing an old manor house, Canterville Chase. With their ready money, the Otises are the new imperialists, ready to "paint[] the Old World red": "I come from a modern country," Mr. Washington Otis announces, "where we have everything that money can buy" (2003: 184). His initials, W.O., are Wilde's in reverse. The Otises are devoid of historical consciousness, or even a modicum of curiosity about their new property, which is haunted, it turns out, by the ghost of an evil sixteenth-century aristocrat, Sir Simon de Canterville, notorious for his hair-raising skills. Comedy ensues when the ghost fails to scare or even to annoy the unflappable family, despite using every gothic trick in his ghostly repertoire. When the housekeeper explains to the Americans that a spectral "blood-stain" on the sitting-room carpet dates to 1575 and "has been much admired by tourists and others, and cannot be removed" (2003: 186), Mr. Otis uses "Pinkerton's Champion Stain Remover and Paragon Detergent" to "clean it up in no time" (2003: 186). Humiliated by the Otises' mischievous twin boys, nicknamed "The Stars and Stripes," the ghost sinks into a depression and retreats into the wainscoting. His soul is eventually released into the next world, when the Otises' fifteen-year-old daughter, Virginia, who is more historically minded than her parents and brothers, opens her heart to him, praying for his tortured soul, moved to tears by his three centuries of suffering. Wilde's comical ghost story is a meditation on the ethical power of historical consciousness, on its ability to help us transcend the myopic confines of modern life. At the same time, however, the story is a meditation on the literary history of comedy, on the tension within nineteenth-century comedy between satirical and sympathetic humor. In the end, Wilde avoids privileging one over the other, opting instead to let satire and humor haunt each other, his reader's laughter bridging both comic realms.

CHAPTER ONE

Form

An Empire of Jokes in the Age of American Expansion

TODD NATHAN THOMPSON

The Book of 1000 Comical Stories: An Endless Repast of Fun (1859) features a joke called “A YANKEE BOAST,” which depicts a friendly argument between the US and Britain:

A John Bull and a Yankee were “blowing” on the size of their respective possessions while in one of our public saloons a few evenings ago, when John remarked that “fortunately the Americans could not go *farther* westward than the Pacific shore.” Yankee scratched his pate for a moment, and triumphantly replied, “Why, good gracious, they’re already leveling the Rocky Mountains and carting the dirt out west; I had a letter last week from my cousin, who is living three hundred miles west of the Pacific shore—on *made land!*”

—Shillaber 1859: 103

This joke made the rounds of newspapers, magazines, and jest books, with over a hundred reprints between 1855 and 1877, including in such diverse outlets as *Moore’s Rural New-Yorker* (1856), *Sailor’s Magazine* (1858), *Irish Miscellany* (1858), *Littell’s Living Age* (1858), the *Columbian Register* (1867), and even William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* (1856).¹

The joke’s popularity derives from its comic enactment of Manifest Destiny tied to Anglophobia: other versions of the joke end with “The Englishman gave in” or “The Englishman sloped.” The joke leverages Southwestern humor’s

aggressive exaggeration about frontiersmen's superhuman abilities to conquer their natural surroundings in the service of westward expansion and empire-building. Knocking down the Rocky Mountains to extend the physical space of the North American continent, specifically for further Yankee settlement, literalizes the drive to "overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions," in the famous words of John L. O'Sullivan (1845: 5). But in doing so, the joke also makes clear that Americans' imperial ambitions did not stop at the Pacific shore. The Yankee's description of artificially extending America into the Pacific allegorizes Americans' interest in expansion into the Pacific during two decades when annexation of Hawai'i was a hot topic.

A similar *bon mot*, titled "Tall Talk," appears in the 1865 jest book *The American Joe Miller: A Collection of Yankee Wit and Humour*:

A Kentuckian was once asked what he considered the boundaries of the United States. "The boundaries of our country, sir?" he replied. "Why, sir, on the north we are bounded by the Aurora Borealis, on the east we are bounded by the rising sun, on the south we are bounded by the procession of the Equinoxes, and on the west by the Day of Judgment."

—Kempt 1865: 130

This piece of tall-tale exaggeration about US expansion also shows how Southwestern humor's trademark braggadocio worked in the service of imperialism through a hyperbolic claiming of Manifest Destiny. Both jests are emblematic of a prominent strain of humor in the mid-nineteenth-century US that echoed and adumbrated Americans' fascination with far-off lands and peoples in conjunction with its newfound imperial ambitions, especially after the US–Mexico War ended in 1848.

This chapter considers how popular media containing nineteenth-century American humor—comic almanacs, joke books, humor periodicals, newspapers, and comic lectures—expressed an imperial fantasy of Manifest Destiny reaching to and beyond California's shores through jokes and sketches featuring comic frontiersmen pushing ever west and comically encountering the "other." Such humorous engagement with the ambiguities of frontiers, borders, and expansion expresses American interest in and anxiety about annexation and imperialism long before 1898, when the US is commonly assumed to have become an imperial power in the Spanish–American War.

Of course, a study of form in nineteenth-century humor could pinpoint any number of other comic forms and genres as practiced across the globe. It could, for instance, focus on literary modes such as social or political satire, as practiced by Jane Austen, George Gordon (Lord Byron), William Makepeace Thackeray, and Oscar Wilde in England (Galperin 2005: 512; Braun 2005: 280–1); Nikolai

Gogol in Russia; Honoré de Balzac in France; Herman Melville, Sarah Payson Willis Parton (Fanny Fern), and Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) in the US (Palmeri 2007: 372); or Spanish journalists in satirical publications (Gerassi-Navarro and Medina-Bañón 2005: 567). Alternatively, it might consider popular performance genres such as American blackface minstrelsy, French farce, or European comedies of manners. Or it could look at the emergence of visual humor such as political cartoons, as practiced by illustrators like Sir John Tenniel and Matthew Morgan in Britain, Wilhelm Busch in Germany, Honoré-Victorin Daumier in France, or Thomas Nast and Frank Bellew in the US (Goldstein 2005: 123).

But this chapter instead focuses on comic forms that circulated widely, over large swaths of time and geographical space, during a mid-nineteenth-century “print explosion” that led to what Meredith McGill has labeled the “culture of reprinting” in the nineteenth-century US (Johannsen 1985: 16; McGill 2002: 2). It does so because of the vast, various, and oft-ignored reading audiences that such humor reached through multiple print media. Historian Bob Nicholson has argued that analyzing jokes in British newspapers can “help to reconstruct the experience of communities who are often under-represented in the historical record” (2015: 9). Studying the circulation of humor through its multiple appearances in popular but ephemeral print genres best reveals how humor influenced popular attitudes during the imperial age.

Partly due to a continued investment in the concept of authorship, most humor scholars have paid more attention to sketches attributable to well-known comic authors—such as Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), James Russell Lowell (as Hosea Biglow), Sarah Payson Willis Parton (Fanny Fern), and David Ross Locke (Petroleum V. Nasby), to name a few American examples—than to the print circulation of anonymous bits like those discussed above. This commitment to the author function has led critics to value the sustained productions of individual humorists over the quick and scattershot dissemination of jokes and *bon mots*. The omnipresence of such humor in all formats, however, implies that nineteenth-century readers did not share these prejudices in their laughter. In this chapter, I seek to reverse that bias by focusing more on ephemeral, “network authored” humor appearing and reappearing across multiple cheap media (Cordell 2015: 417–18). This shift in emphasis is made possible by increased access to digital archives of periodicals, almanacs, and jest books as well as by recent scholarship in periodical studies urging the reconsideration of “viral texts” that circulated widely in nineteenth-century print (2015: 421).²

Much of nineteenth-century American humor was rooted in oral traditions, but it increasingly found homes in a wide variety of print venues beginning with a print boom from the 1830s and through the 1880s, “during which the American public was increasingly offered relatively inexpensive comic materials, including joke books, magazines, gift books, and newspapers, as well as tickets

to laughing gas exhibitions, minstrel shows, and comic lectures” (Hughes 2013: 45). As a result, as Jennifer Hughes points out, nineteenth-century America humor “became a forum for subtle consideration of antebellum anxieties over citizenship and human rights through overt examination of who had the right to laugh” (2013: 45). All of the genres Hughes mentions feature typical American humor in two relatively distinct forms: the joke and the sketch. Nineteenth-century American jokes, like the jokes of all times and places, are recognizable by their relative brevity and a punchline that resolves or counters the confusion established in the setup. “A YANKEE BOAST,” for instance, creates ambiguity through the British fellow’s logical assumption that “Americans could not go *farther* westward than the Pacific shore.” That understanding is countered by the American’s illogical, jingoistic brag that physically erases the watery border assumed by the British as the end line of expansion. This joke and others often feature one or more of what Jesse Bier has labeled as the most common formal devices of American humor: “nonsense, confusionism, reversal, anticlimax, antiproverbialism, undercutting,” which, according to Bier, “indicates the predominately negative, penetrative tendencies throughout its history” (1968: 8).

Sketches, on the other hand, may be slightly longer and operate not through discernible punchlines but through the distillation of a particular character or type. Sailor yarns, the framed narratives of Southwestern humor, character sketches, and shaggy dog stories are all, under this classification, sketches. Throughout the century, comic sketches also employed tall tales, epistolary devices, dramatic monologues, and riffs on the English essay tradition (Blair 1937: 106–7). Constance Rourke emphasizes the sketch’s use of scene in distinguishing American from British humor in the nineteenth century:

Our comic similes, our humor, have abounded in scenes. The wild scene with its white oaks, racoons, possums, bears, sprawling rivers, lush growth made a subject of which our early humorists never seemed to tire. Comically, poetically, yet exactly, they drew these subjects again and again, and this turn of absorption makes one of the fresh imaginative contours which our humor has followed.

—[1935] 1984: 61–2

For Rourke, the immense, relatively untamed expanse of the North American continent formed the backdrop to American humor in a way that it could not in crowded Europe. American sketches consistently wrung humor from describing Americans’ hyperbolic hubris in confronting wild, natural scenes. In 1882, H. R. Haweis characterized “the vastness of American nature and the smallness of man, especially European man” as a major wellspring of American humor; “their general ability to ‘whip creation,’” he wrote, “turns largely upon

the bigness of their rivers, mountains, and prairies, and the superior enterprise generated by these immensities" ([1882] 1984: 30).

Though it is structured similarly to "A YANKEE BOAST" and is quite short, "Tall Talk" may be considered a sketch simply because it does not set up a punchline; instead, it reveals American character through the Kentuckian's persistent re-description of national boundaries. Of course, since "Tall Talk" appears in the *The American Joe Miller*, a jest book, and "A YANKEE BOAST" appears in *The Book of 1000 Comical Stories*, whose title implies that it holds mainly narrative sketches, it would seem that nineteenth-century humorists and readers were not particularly invested in these distinctions.

These two prevailing comic forms, the joke and the sketch, because of their brevity and their ability to stand alone or alongside disparate material without further contextualization, were highly amenable to repeated dissemination in the "culture of reprinting" and therefore provide a glimpse into the national and sometimes transnational scope ("A YANKEE BOAST" also appeared in British newspapers) of the mobility of written humor in the various comic genres that held those forms, from comic almanacs to jest books, humor in periodicals and newspapers, and the lecture circuit. Though the same jokes and sketches reappeared across these media, which freely borrowed from each other in the American culture of reprinting, these outlets were structured differently and so will be treated separately in this chapter. American comic almanacs, although offering a miscellany of jokes and sketches much like eighteenth-century British jest books, printed those comic bits alongside calendars, sayings, recipes, and practical advice in the almanac tradition. Jest books were generally much longer, holding hundreds of numbered jokes and sketches, often in bound volumes. Humor periodicals, most of them short-lived, placed comic bits in columns in the newspaper or magazine format, and printed them on cheap paper meant to be read and discarded. Humor in regular newspapers and magazines appeared alongside non-comic items such as news, editorials, and advertisements, sprinkling levity over the serious news of the town, nation, and world.

COMIC ALMANACS

Beginning with the publication of Charles Ellms' *The American Comic Almanac* in 1830, comic almanacs became a major outlet for humor for the American masses. Comic almanacs featured calendars and astrological projections similar to regular almanacs but replaced accompanying matter such as statistics, lists of government officials, and the like (along with pedantic moralizing) with humorous anecdotes, ribald jokes, riddles, poems, and illustrations (Secor 1987: 557; Winsip 2011: 6). As Robert Secor notes, "Perhaps the best record of the development of America's popular taste in humor can be found in its

almanacs" (1987: 549) because their popularity provides an index to the types of humor that American reading audiences were eager to pay for and consume. If these almanacs' "jokes could be crude and uncouth," Secor notes, "they found a ready audience" (1987: 557). The humor in comic almanacs relied heavily on word-play, puns, and exaggeration, all of which appeared in both the illustrations and in the text. Southwestern humor, sailor yarns, and Yankee jokes were also common. Indeed, comic almanacs "traced their lineage to jest and joke books" (Lofaro 1987: xix); as Michael Winsip puts it, Ellms' innovation transformed "a traditional genre for a new purpose, turning the almanac into a joke book" (2011: 6).

Due to its popularity, Ellms' *American Comic Almanac* was quickly followed by a plethora of imitators (Winsip 2011: 6–7), and comic almanacs—with names like *Sam Slick's Comic Almanac*, *Rip Snorter Comic Almanac*, *The Devil's Comical Oldmanick*, *Laugh and Grow Fat Almanac*, and *Elton's Comic All-My-Neck*—proliferated until the outbreak of the Civil War. In general, most jokes and anecdotes in comic almanacs limn domestic scenes ("domestic" here meaning both home and American), drawing their humor from local drunks, amours gone wrong, agricultural mishaps, Yankee rubes, and racial stereotypes of Black and Irish Americans. But some comic almanacs, especially in the 1840s and 1850s, were also interested in issues of expansion and annexation.

During and immediately after the US–Mexico War, for instance, comic almanacs jumped at the chance to mock Mexicans while celebrating the US invasion of Mexico. The almanacs produced by publishers Turner & Fisher (who would eventually take over the Crockett almanacs) were particularly full of war humor. Relying on puns—especially those using words like "grape" and "roll" that had both domestic and military meanings—as well as dialect humor and gruesome descriptions of war fatalities, comic sketches in *Fisher's Comic Almanac* and *Turner's Comic Almanac* from 1847 to 1850 used humor to buttress the war effort by lionizing American troops and generals (especially General and, from 1848 to 1852, US President Zachary Taylor) and trafficking in stereotypes about Mexican savagery and cowardice. The repetition of these stereotypes may have helped shape American attitudes about Mexico and Mexicans because, as Dennis Howitt and Kwame Owusu-Bempah have argued, in racist jokes, "the joke builds the stereotype, the stereotype does not make the joke" (2005: 48).

The most common trope in these almanacs is a juxtaposition of Mexican soldiers' bragging about whipping North American "barbarians" and "invaders" with their fainthearted fleeing in battles. For example, in *Fisher's Comic Almanac* 1849, "BIG FEAR AND A LITTLE COURAGE" describes a Mexican soldier who "was in the hourly habit of puffing his cigarette and damning the Americanoes for a race of Northern barbarian cowards, and panting for a call from his brave and magnanimous nation, when he could have

the glorious chance of whipping a whole troop of Yankees.” But, upon hearing that General Winfield Scott had taken Vera Cruz and was marching on Mexico City, where “every Mexican must turn out, or be shot for a coward,” the soldier turns pale, trembles, and asks his wife, “Where’s a little courage?” His boy offers him a canteen and says, “Here’s a little courage,” a pun on liquor as liquid courage (1848: n.p.). In *Fisher’s Comic Almanac 1851*, a “Quix-otic Mexican Knight . . . swore one day in the capital, that he would mount his steed and destroy the entire race of Americanos del Norte”; but, encountering “a shower of hail” along the way, he turned around and “galloped off home,



FIGURE 1.1: “A Shocking Bad Knight” in *Fisher’s Comic Almanac 1851*. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

stating that his valor was so great that the very elements hailed him" (1850: n.p.). The accompanying image illustrates this absurdity, mocking the soldier while domesticizing war.

The sketches treating the US–Mexico War in *Turner's Comic Almanac* tend to be slightly less jingoistic, focusing more on the comic experiences of American soldiers at the front. For instance, *Turner's Comic Almanac 1848* includes at least six sketches about the war, including "CAMPAIGNING ON THE RIO GRANDE," a sarcastic encomium on the comforts of army camping when a river floods; "THE SOLDIER'S FAREWELL," a comic dialogue between a man and his wife, who worries that he will lose limbs in the war and therefore be rendered unfit for work; and "THE MANUAL OF ARMS," which offers a twisted how-to on bayoneting Mexicans. This almanac, though, also features ironic tributes to Mexican bravery, mockery of Mexican General (and sometimes president) Santa Anna, and comic praise of General Taylor besting them in sketches like "AMPUDIA RETREATING FROM MONTERREY," "DANCING THE POLKA," and "DRILLING THE MEXICANS" (1847: n.p.). *Turner's Comic Almanac 1849* focuses on American soldiers' experiences in "EVADING THE DUTY," about an American soldier sleeping on duty; "A HOOSIER CAPTAIN IN MEXICO," with a description of soldiers from Indiana; and "SEEING THE ELEPHANT: OR, A TAIL TOO MUCH," which literalizes the saying "seeing the elephant" (a nineteenth-century Americanism about seeing the reality of a situation, often war, as compared to its romanticized ideal) (1848: n.p.). These sketches and others reset old gags and stereotypes in an exotic locale during the US's first foreign war; but in doing so they also—either indirectly through tacit support of the war, or more directly through mockery of Mexicans—use humor to enact symbolically the violent processes as well as the cultural complications of expansion.

DAVY CROCKETT ALMANACS

The best known of the antebellum almanacs were the various Crockett almanacs—published between 1835 and 1856 in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston—which mythologized the life of backwoodsman-turned-Congressman-turned-Alamo-martyr David Crockett, reshaping Crockett into America's "first comic superman" (Lofaro 1987: xv). Ellms may have been the initial creator of the Crockett almanacs, the first seven of which were published under a false Nashville imprint so as "to capitalize on the then-current craze for all things Western," but actually produced in Boston (Hutton 1998: 13; Winsip 2011: 8). It was, according to Crockett biographer Michael Lofaro, "arguably one of the most popular and widespread publishing enterprises of its day" (1987: xvi). James E. Caron highlights the breadth of the Crockett almanacs' reading audience: "the almanacs commanded an audience that knew no boundaries,

encompassing adults and juveniles, middle-class city and rustic dwellers, yeoman farmers and mechanics, eastern seaboard as well as western frontier folk” (2011: 165).

Like other comic almanacs, the Crockett almanacs combined astronomical calculations, calendars, and weather predictions with humorous anecdotes and droll wisdom; but their focus on Crockett and his fictional or mythologized friends—especially his sailor pal Ben Hardin (sometimes Harding), Mississippi boatman Mike Fink, and a host of “riproarious shemales” (Lofaro 2001)—moved the traditional almanac setting to the savage backwoods of the old Southwest, where these frontier vanguards of US expansionism staged superhuman feats of comic violence against the natural world and, often, Native Americans. Built largely on the conceit of the “boast,” the comic sketches in the Crockett almanacs narrate Crockett and friends’ incredible (and often incredibly violent) deeds in a way that “showcased him as the epitome of the boisterous backwoods hero and nurtured the growth of his legendary deeds” (Lofaro 1987: xvi).

This hero-making only accelerated after Crockett’s death at the Alamo in 1836. In the 1840s, the Crockett almanacs increasingly deployed their exuberant hijinks to expansionist ends through “a wildly jingoistic nationalism” (Hutton 1998: 18). When the publishing house Turner and Fisher took over the Crockett almanacs in 1843, “politics, and most especially the great question of national expansion, became common topics of the almanacs” (Hutton 1998: 18). Anti-expansionists are, in the virulent racism of these almanacs, labeled as “all the Mixy Mexican Spanish brown an’ red niggars, an’ the Malgamation party in Uncle Sam’s lands, who go in for Annexation with the blackies” (quoted in Dorson 1939: 157).³ In this speech, Crockett verbally equates annexation with amalgamation while seemingly ignoring the racial mixing that inevitably would occur from taking over western lands.

Like other comic almanacs, the Crockett almanacs staged comic attacks on Mexico just before, during, and after the US–Mexico War. Mexico provided a new arena for Crockett’s heroism; his sorties there take the form of tall-tale brags, such as when he unites the two nations in the 1846 almanac by drinking up the entire Gulf of Mexico:

In order to remove this one little liquid obstacle out o’ the way o’ sich a great national wedding, I’ve jist straddled across the neck o’ this pond, like Captain Collossus straddling the Roads, an’ commenced drinking it up instanter . . . Then, if any human crittur, Yankee, Texian or Mexican, dares to oppose instanter annexation, saw me up if I don’t swallow them to. An arter that I’ll jist mount my alligator, travel into the middle o’ Mexico, . . . teach the natives, red niggers and creoles the true bred Yankee Independence and Republicanism; and then run for President myself!

Then if the critturs can't get along arter that, why I'll drink every spoonful of water between Texas and the United States, and annex her myself, in spite o' old Spain and all the monkeys called monarchs in creation.

—quoted in Dorson 1939: 158

This remarkable passage combines phenomenal feats of strength—drinking the Gulf and riding an alligator to Mexico City to defeat the Mexican army singlehandedly—with a somewhat paradoxical combination of a threat to “all the monkeys called monarchs in creation” and a similar menace to “any human crittur” who disagrees with him and “dares to oppose instanter annexation.” Crockett’s expansionist Americanism seeks to open new “areas of freedom” through violence but quashes democratic dissent regarding the project. Additionally, the repetition of “myself” highlights the heroic individual action through which the Crockett almanacs frame annexation; Crockett sees going it alone as a democratically representative deed done for the whole nation.

In some of his exploits during the US–Mexico War, Crockett uses his godlike powers and his connection to the natural world to turn himself into a weapon of mass destruction. This occurs three times in Fisher’s *Davy Crockett’s Almanac* 1847. First, in “CROCKETT BLOWING UP A MAN OF WAR,” he destroys a Mexican pirate ship by shooting lightning out of his eyes, after which “I picked up three heads an half a dozen legs an arms, an carried ‘em home to Mrs. Crockett to kindle the fire with” (1846: n.p.). Elsewhere, an image



FIGURE 1.2: “Crockett Defending the Mouth of the Mississippi” in *Davy Crockett’s Almanac* 1847. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

captioned “CROCKETT DEFENDING THE MOUTH OF THE MISSISSIPPI” pictures Crockett mounted on an alligator with a gun, a cannon, and a box full of cannon balls and other weapons. In this drawing, Crockett’s fame for killing and taming wild beasts combines with his fame as a soldier in



FIGURE 1.3: “Crockett Delivering His Celebrated War Speech” in *Davy Crockett’s Almanac* 1847. Photo by Fotosearch / Stringer / Getty Images.

the Creek War and at the Alamo. He has weaponized nature in order to defend the US and help subjugate disputed territories. The drawing accompanying “CROCKETT DELIVERING HIS CELEBRATED WAR SPEECH” goes even further: here Crockett’s chest is made of gunpowder barrels and his arms of cannons. He shoots smoke from his eyes, breathes what seem to be bayonets from his mouth, and shoots cannons from his neck. In his left cannon-arm he wields a lightning bolt. In the speech, he again describes foreign war through personal, domestic disputes: “Pierce the heart of the enemy as you would a feller that spit in your face, knocked down your wife, burnt up your houses, and called your dog a skunk!” (1846: n.p.). Of course, since the war was in Mexico, not the US, Mexican soldiers could not have done these things.

Catherine L. Albanese remarks upon the odd relationship between Crockett’s uninhibited, chaotic violence and its use to pacify and extend the American frontier: “nature was conquered and controlled when heroic humans such as Davy Crockett lost all semblance of self-control in an ecstasy of violence” (1981: 486). As James E. Caron puts it, “By becoming more savage than the savages he encounters in the wilderness, Davy Crockett ironically ensures the triumph of civilized values and behavior. He is thus a figure both of cultural degeneracy—the ultimate backwards man from the backwoods—and a figure of cultural progress—the pioneer who trailblazes for the civilization that follows” (2011: 165). Such a combination of “cultural degeneracy” and “cultural progress” was attractive to antebellum American readers; Crockett’s crude language and violent expansionism allowed readers to imagine the American frontier (and beyond) as tame-able, if only through the uncouth savagery of its mythical frontiersman.

Like other comic almanacs, the Crockett almanacs tend to frame national issues in domestic terms. In “Crockett on the Oregon Question,” for instance, Crockett uses backwoods parables to describe the rift between the US and Britain over Oregon territory. Crockett explains through a bawdy political allegory:

I expose the reader has heered o’ them diggins out West, that are called Oregon, and how the British wants to have a joint occupancy of that ‘ere clearing. It’s a sort of insinuation that we can’t take keer of it alone . . . Thar war once a pesky Yankee pedlar that put up at my house, and had as much bear’s meat and whiskey in his long guts as he could carry, but he wasn’t satisfied with that, for he wanted the joint occupancy of my wife too. So when I got out of bed early in the morning, he crept along to the disputed territory and began to turn down the coverlid. My wife heered him, and made believe she war asleep, but kept one eye open. Jest as he put one leg into the bed, she took the clothesline that hung close by, an’ tied it round his ankle, and made him fast by one leg to the bed-post. Then she got up and opened a hive of bees on him. He danced and roared most beautiful. And I

think John Bull will do the same when he gits among the Yankee bees of Oregon.

—quoted in Dorson 1939: 138–9

The humor in this story derives largely from the conflation of the language of national expansion with that of illicit sex: to wit, Crockett says that the peddler “wanted the joint occupancy of my wife” and describes Crockett’s wife’s bed and body as “disputed territory.” She repels him in typical Crockett “riproarious shemale” fashion, creating a scene of physical comedy when she sets a hive of bees on him.⁴ Crockett only returns to the political-geographical scene of Oregon in the last sentence, to close the frame of the allegory. In this way, the Crockett almanac leverages the domestic focus and function of almanacs to discuss complex political issues of national interest.

A similar use of domestic imagery to describe nationalist expansion can be seen in the Philadelphia *Crockett Almanac* 1853, which includes the following short anecdote: “A KENTUCKY ORATOR says, that Uncle Sam is growing so large in his dimensions and corporation, that it will soon take the entire sky to make him a pair of breeches, and the whole earth to make him a pair of boots!” (1852: n.p.). Uncle Sam, as the personification of the growing US body politic, becomes literally larger than life, and the very earth and sky are depicted as a helpmeet making homespun clothing for him to don as he continues his prodigious expansion.

Crockett’s bosom buddy and the ostensible editor of some Crockett almanacs, Ben Hardin(g), connects Crockett’s stomping grounds of Tennessee, Washington, DC, and the Texas frontier to the larger, watery world. According to Paul Andrew Hutton, the Hardin(g) sea yarns allowed Crockett almanac publishers to combine “tall-tale traditions of the seafaring Northeast with those of the Old Southwest. In this way the publishers of the almanacs united the Northeast and the West in a popular culture marriage of sorts that foreshadowed a more important economic and political union” (Hutton 1998: 15). As a former sailor, Hardin(g) tells Crockett and the almanacs’ readers yarns from his own and his compatriots’ ocean exploits. “A Sailor’s Yarn,” from the Nashville *Crockett Almanac* 1841, uses a double frame narrative: Crockett retells a story that Ben Harding had told him about a shipmate named Bill Bunker from an expedition on a ship hunting for skins and whale oil. While anchored on an unnamed island, Bunker spies and awkwardly courts a “hansum” “Ingin gal” who turns out to be the “king’s dawter” (1840: n.p.). The ensuing humor derives from the physical comedy of courting gone wrong that leads to a dangerous cultural misunderstanding. It thus uses the form of the sketch to internationalize the domestic courting humor common to comic almanacs.

In later Crockett almanacs, Crockett himself takes his act abroad, spreading the backwoods American way to such far-flung places as Haiti, Hawai‘i, and

Japan. In most cases, as in his exploits on the North American continent, racial others are singled out for displacement or slaughter. In “Crockett and the Black Emperor of Hayti,” from *Crockett Almanac 1856*, Crockett travels to Haiti and meets Faustin Soulouque, who in 1849 had been proclaimed emperor of Haiti. Crockett engages in comparative racialism, describing Soulouque as having “more feathers in his hat than twenty Injuns” (1855: n.p.), redefining Soulouque’s military insignias as markers of racial otherness and, ultimately, symbols of anti-democratic authoritarianism. This becomes more clear when, upon seeing Soulouque, “down fell all the darkies on their hands an’ knees, or their stomachs.” Crockett, of course, refuses to kneel. When Soulouque demands, “I am the mighty Emperor of Hayti; down on your knees!” Crockett replies with proud republicanism, “I am Col. Davy Crockett, one of the sovereign people of Uncle Sam, that never neels to any individual this side of sunshine.” With this declaration of freedom, Crockett commences his slaughter: when the field hands move in on Crockett “with clubs, cords, an’ cane-cutters . . . I just took an’ pulled up a couple of hard sun-dried canes by the roots, dashed in among ‘em, an’ the way I sugar-caned that entire nigger creation, Emperor an’ all, out of them diggings, was equal to Sampstrong among the Philistines” (1855: n.p.). In roosting Haiti’s emperor “out of them diggings,” Crockett, of course, has cleared the way for himself and other Americans. Indeed, the potential annexation of the island of Santo Domingo was a topic of political discussion in the 1840s and 1850s. Crockett thus smooths the way for annexation through characteristic violence, which he justifies through anti-authoritarian rhetoric.

Crockett invades another island country in the *Crockett Almanac 1854*, which features a sketch titled “CROCKETT AMONG THE CANNIBALS,” in which a young Crockett and Ben Hardin are shipwrecked off Hawai’i, where, after “swimmen, diven, sharken, fighten, and killen about in the open sea for three days,” they are captured by Hawaiian cannibals, who “war maken up a plot to eat me right off for a *tit bit*.” With typical violence, he fights back and feeds the natives to the sharks in “a cannibal supper has been a terrification to the hull creation o’ cannibals” (1853: n.p.). Crockett’s suspenseful self-description of his own ferocity echoes his accounts of Indian killing on the frontier in previous almanacs. This sketch, then, merely moves Crockett and his racially motivated homicidal tendencies to a new, more exotic locale. As Howitt and Owusu-Bempah point out in their analysis of racist jokes, “the common thread running through racist humour is some sort of violence against other ethnic groups and their cultures. It is essential to serve this ideology of racial hierarchy with notions, ideas and myths masquerading as ‘facts.’ The function of racist jokes is to reinforce the presumed superiority of one racial or ethnic group over another” (2005: 50). In this sketch, the superiority that Crockett asserts over the Hawaiians he slaughters is not cultural or moral; it is, rather,

superior brute strength staged for imperial ends. Crockett and Hardin, as exemplars of western settlers, make landfall on Hawai'i, kill the natives, and take possession.

"CROCKETT AMONG THE CANNIBALS" offered a grisly contribution to debates about the annexation of the Sandwich Islands in the 1850s, when rumors abounded of impending filibustering attempts by adventurers seeking to overthrow the monarchy (Stevens 1968: 43), and annexation in general was much discussed in US as well as Hawaiian newspapers. Indeed, in 1852 US President Franklin Pierce hoped to add Hawai'i to new territories acquired after the US–Mexico War.

Similar tall-tale imperialism is at work in the *Crockett Almanac 1856* in "CROCKETT OUT-DIVING THE PEARL DIVERS," in which Crockett narrates a yarn in which he and Ben Hardin observe the lucrative business of pearl-diving off the coast of Japan. Crockett decides to try his luck, enters an underwater cave, and harvests oysters by dancing "the Kentucky reel on top of 'em, so all kicking strong, that they all opened their jaws with the force of the heat like geese pecking up corn." Finally, after 11 and $\frac{3}{4}$ hours "under the pickle" (thus smashing the previous record of two minutes under water), Crockett emerges with "pearls enough to buy a hull ship; paid a *diver's* fee to the natives, who fell down and gave three rounds of *grunts* for Davy Crockett, the *pearl* of all *pearl divers*" (1855: n.p., original emphasis). This sketch is much less violent than the 1854 "CROCKETT AMONG THE CANNIBALS"; Crockett cooperates with, and is celebrated by, the natives even as he outperforms them at their own profession. Still, through puns, bravado, and American colloquialisms, Crockett puts his stamp on Japan.

This sketch was likely written in 1855, just two years after Matthew Perry brought four ships into the harbor at Tokyo Bay, opening up trade and contact between Japan and the Western world for the first time in 200 years. For the comic almanac makers, then, Crockett's international exploits in almanac sketches became a way to understand, and Americanize, exotic foreign lands about which Americans were so curious. Crockett is a sort of comic emissary to Japan, Hawai'i, Haiti, and elsewhere; but, because Crockett tends to treat Pacific and Caribbean islands just like the American frontier, as a space to conquer by killing natives and through extraordinary feats, these almanac sketches extend Crockett-style Manifest Destiny abroad, blurring the lines between American expansion and American imperialism.

JEST BOOKS

Beginning in the 1830s, comic almanacs took over from jest books as the most popular American genre of humor. But jest books continued throughout the nineteenth century to traffic in similar (and, sometimes, exactly the same) jokes,

sketches, and other comic material as comic almanacs, albeit without the non-comic features of almanacs such as calendars, household advice, and astrology. Jest books were also much longer than almanacs, often housing hundreds of disparate comic bits in their pages. P. M. Zall writes that, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century jest books, jokes “were only one among many diverse elements which also included serious and comic anecdotes, aphorisms, epigrams, rebuses, riddles, and songs. To call a jestbook a jokebook is like calling *Poor Richard’s Almanac* a calendar” (1980: 3).

Though most American jest books before 1850 are made up mostly of jokes taken from English publications (Weiss 1943: 280), some jest books adapted old chestnuts to American soil or featured originally American content, including ethnic jokes about Native Americans, enslaved Africans, and immigrants from Ireland, Scotland, and Germany. A brief synopsis of the organization and contents of one jest book provides a snapshot of the genre at mid-century. *The American Joe Miller* of 1853 seems to be a reprint of the 1839 *Joe Miller* (the preface is dated 1839); as such, it does not deal with current US events such as sectionalism or the aftermath of the US–Mexico War. Instead, it offers a seemingly random collection of 347 numbered jokes, funny stories, character sketches, and *bon mots*, each with a descriptive title. Entries range greatly in length, from a few lines to a page and a half. Many items are reprinted from and attributed to newspapers and magazines, showing how seamlessly humor circulated across multiple media. Newspapers were also a common subject of the jokes themselves. Other recurring topics included farming, hunting, fishing, and conceptions of American identity. I also counted twenty-four Yankee jokes, twelve African American jokes (usually in dialect), eleven instances of Southwestern humor, eleven jests on love and courting, eleven pieces on medicine and doctors, seven on the English, seven with a steamboat as its setting, six on drinking or temperance, and four jokes on women or gender norms. The fact that there were only two Irish jokes and two German/Dutch jokes (a very common subject in later jest books) shows how topical ethnic jokes can be; originally published in 1839, this book’s first edition appeared before the mass emigrations of the 1840s and the attendant rise of the anti-immigrant Know-Nothing party. What *was* timely in 1839 was the Panic of 1837, a financial crisis that rocked the US through the mid-1840s. As a result, *The American Joe Miller* also features several pieces about “hard times.” Nevertheless, the 1853 reissue assumes that its audience will respond to the same jokes as in 1839, hinting at a certain timelessness associated with jest book humor.

In *The American Joe Miller* and other jest books, bits are often set in a particular region, state, or town. *The American Joe Miller* contains the following titles: “Yankee economy,” “A sketch of the Nova Scotians,” “Vocals in Rhode Island,” “Dialogue in a Jersey tavern,” “A Kentuckian among the ladies,”

“Maryland wit,” “A Penn-sylvanian quilldriver,” “Encouragement to dentists at the south,” “Philadelphia pun-gents,” “A blind painter in New York,” “A scene in Nashville,” and “Early rising in Connecticut” (1853: 9–17). In addition, the majority of jokes and sketches in the volume begin either by setting the scene in a particular American state or town or by crediting a specific newspaper. Of the four jests on one two-page spread, the first credits the *New York Commercial Advertiser* and depicts Houston St. in New York City, the second describes beer in Rhode Island, the third attributes comic dialogue to “Mr. Seth Harris, of Poughkeepsie,” and the fourth begins, “An old lady, residing at Mobile . . .” (1853: 190–1). In short, the locality is almost always highlighted at the outset, if only to adapt an old joke to a new context. In *The American Joe Miller* and other jest books, the settings offer interpretive cues to readers to apply sectional or town-and-country stereotypes to the ensuing anecdotes. At times, the jests feature multiple American locations in order to offer comic comparisons of regional differences. For example, “Kissing in America” compares the reactions to kisses from girls in Nantucket, Boston, Albany, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania (1853: 124). The invocation of specific place names throughout this and other jest books tends toward a piecemeal nationalism. Representing different areas and peoples of the US—urban and rural, East and West, North and South—through broad stereotypes unifies them in a patchwork quilt of regional quirks.

Despite their mainly domestic concerns, these jest books feature some comic treatments of the American frontier, expansion, and imperial ambition. For instance, *The Book of 1000 Comical Stories: An Endless Repast of Fun*, which includes “A YANKEE BOAST,” also contains “A SPREAD EAGLE TOAST,” a jingoistic piece of expansionist exaggeration. The toast personifies “*Our Nation*” as it grows up, from “its infantile movements . . . on board the May Flower, on the rock of Plymouth, at Jamestown,” through “the ‘capricious squalls’ of its infancy” during the Revolutionary War, during which he was seen “whipping his mother and turning her out of doors.” “In his youth,” the toast continues,

he strode over the prairies of the boundless West, and called them his own, paid tribute to the despots of Barbary in powder and ball, spit in his father’s face from behind cotton bales at New Orleans, whipped the mistress of the ocean, reveled in the halls of Montezuma, straddled the Rocky Mountains, and with one foot upon golden sand and the other upon codfish and lumber, defied the world; in his manhood, clothed in purple and fine linen, he rides over a continent in cushioned cars, rides over the ocean in palace steamers, sends his thoughts on wings of lightning to the world around, thunders at the door of the Celestial Empire and at the portals of distant Japan, slaps his poor decrepit father in the face, and tells him to be careful how he peeks into any of his pickaroons, and threatens to make a sheep pasture of all the land

that joins him. What he will do in old age, God only knows. May he live ten thousand years, “and his shadow never be less.”

—Shillaber 1859: 6

This sketch offers a single-sentence history of the US that operates through the accretion of geographical locations and military triumphs as it personifies the nation as a growing, ever-more powerful, man. In this way, it echoes the tall-tale descriptions of Crockett-like superhumans as manifestations of Young America. This is especially true in the middle of the toast, in which America “straddled the Rocky Mountains” with feet touching each coastline. From there it implies a techno-determinism that associates American innovations with threats of impending imperial conquests in Asia.

This toast is immediately followed by another, no less jingoistic, salute, which the editor claims “must have been delivered by the same highfalutin individual”:

The American Eagle! the American EAGLE! gentleMEN, that proud bird of our liberties, as she stands—as she stands—standing, [with great vigor,] with one foot on the Alleghanies and the other on the Rocky Mountains, and stretching her broad wings from the Atlantic to the Pacific, shall—stretching her broad wings—with one foot on the *Rocky Mountains* and the *other* on the Alleghanies, *shall—shall* HOWL, gentlemen and fellow citizens, in the *glorious freedom* of—HER NATIVE AIR.

—Shillaber 1859: 6

This toast wrings some laughs from readers at the probably inebriated toast-giver, who, as he delivers it, repeats himself and mixes metaphors as he searches for words. But it also shows a similar obsession with patriotically animalizing the American landscape by imagining a figure that physically encompasses it.

If such tall-tale characterization seems reminiscent of the comic almanacs described above, it is because the same humor circulated not only among different jest books but also through comic almanacs, newspapers, and periodicals. *The American Joe Miller*, for instance, contains no less than six Davy Crockett stories. As P. M. Zall characterizes such comic circulation, jest books “copied not only from one another but, in a happy symbiotic cycle, copied from and were copied by almanacs, newspapers, and periodicals” (1980: 3).

HUMOR PERIODICALS AND COMIC LECTURES

The mid-nineteenth century also saw a rise in another important venue for humor: periodicals dedicated solely to the comic. Their regular appearance

allowed them to be more topical than jest books; as David E. Sloane notes, “By the 1840s, comic papers treated theatrical events, burlesqued political and social topics, and offered a wide range of fictional and general news” (1987: xix). Early humor magazines of particular importance were *Spirit of the Times* (1831–61), which published many of the more famous sketches of Southwestern humorists,⁵ and *Knickerbocker Magazine* (1833–65), which published more genteel sketches. Following the model of more famous British humor magazines such as the London *Punch*, which “conquered” the “publishing world” with its cartoons and “light social satire (often in prose) on party politics, manners, and fashion” (Jones 2007: 340), humor magazines began to abound by the 1850s and through the Civil War, with titles like *Carpet Bag* (1851–3), *Yankee Notions* (1852–75), *Frank Leslie’s Budget of Fun* (1858–96), *Comic Monthly* (1859–81), *Phunny Phellow* (1859–76), and *Vanity Fair* (1859–) (Sloane 1988: 55). By 1860, advancements in printing also led to a boon in caricature; many periodicals featured political cartoons—by notable caricaturists such as Thomas Nast, Frank Bellew, and William Newman—lampooning political luminaries, elections, and policies. After the Civil War, more enduring magazines such as *Life*, *Puck*, and *Judge*, according to Sloane, “seemed to have found a wide segment of the American reading population to which to appeal” (1988: 56).



FIGURE 1.4: Uncle Sam reviews the presidential candidates in Thomas Nast’s “May the Best Man Win!” in *Phunny Phellow*, 1864. Photo by The New York Historical Society / Getty Images.

In these and other venues, Southwestern humorists and “literary comedians”—prominent Northern humorists of the middle decades of the nineteenth century, such as Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain), George Horatio Derby (John Phoenix), and Charles Farrar Browne (Artemus Ward)—published their work, often under the guise of their pseudonymous, cracker-box philosopher creations.⁶ According to Walter Blair, these literary comedians’



FIGURE 1.5: “American Humorists” in *Moore’s Rural New-Yorker*, 1873. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

work shifted away from comic regionalism and toward “the general American scene.” Their essays, which were more packed with jokes and “amusing verbal devices” than earlier comic journalism, represented a shift toward a “national scope in humor” (Blair 1937: 117). As opposed to the patchwork quilt of regional stereotypes delineated in jest books like *The American Joe Miller* or the peculiarly western traits of Crockett and his ilk in comic almanacs, these characters represent a more unified and cohesive American comic identity and thus epitomize a homogenization of notions of Americanness in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially after the Civil War.

Some popular literary comedians parlayed their success in comic periodicals into more lucrative careers on the lecture circuit. Beginning in the 1820s, lyceum lectures became a popular outlet for public education of the masses in large cities and small towns.⁷ By the 1860s, comic writers got in on the act: Ward, David Ross Locke (Petroleum V. Nasby), Henry Wheeler Shaw (Josh Billings), Charles Henry Smith (Bill Arp), Edgar Wilson Nye (Bill Nye), and Twain all had successful runs as lecturers, foreshadowing the comedic shift in the US from print to performance. Twain’s career offers a good example of the connection between comic writing and lecturing. Twain developed his comic persona in a series of letters from Hawai‘i for the Sacramento *Union*. He built on the popularity of these letters by composing a lecture, often called “Our Fellow Savages of the Sandwich Islands,” which he delivered for several years beginning in 1866. These lectures raised Twain’s profile as a comic writer as he published sketches in newspapers and humor periodicals. The lectures and letters also led American newspapers and newspaper readers to view Twain as an expert on Hawai‘i during renewed rumors of US annexation of the islands during the 1870s. In fact, the New York *Daily Tribune* asked Twain to write two letters commenting on Hawaiian politics, commercial possibilities, and annexation talk.⁸

Despite the success of these comics at the lectern and in the proliferating humor periodicals, most humor periodicals in the nineteenth century were short-lived. Brander Matthews lamented in 1875 that “the history of comic journalism in America is merely a list of tombstones” (quoted in Weiss 1943: 289). In 1873, Frederick Hudson hypothesized about “the reasons why no comic paper prospers in the United States,” concluding that “our wit finds vent in the daily newspapers. Where wit is so spontaneous a production, it must be gathered at once or it is lost.” In short, Hudson blames the “failure of” comic periodicals on the fact that “our wit . . . goes into all the papers” (1873: 695–6).

HUMOR IN NEWSPAPERS

Beginning in the 1870s, “there was a tremendous expansion in newspaper humor writing across the entire range of newspaper and magazine publishing”

(Sloane 1987: xii), featuring cracker-box philosophers like Robert Henry Newell (Orpheus C. Kerr), Mortimer Thomson (Doesticks), Nasby, Billings, and Nye, many of whom relied on dialect and cacography for their humor.⁹ But character-driven comic sketches had been finding homes in newspapers since the 1830s with the advent of Seba Smith's Down East Maine character Jack Downing, and continuing with pseudonymous creations like Frances Whitcher's Widow Bedot, Sarah Payson Willis Parton's Fanny Fern, and Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber's Mrs. Partington. Walter Blair writes, "the newspapers were active in carrying this humorous material into every part of the nation. Not long after 1830, every paper that could discover a comic writer on its staff was encouraging him to provide amusement for its readers" (1993: 26). The main difference between comic periodicals and regular newspapers, in terms of how this humor was received by readers, is that in newspapers jokes and humor columns mingled promiscuously with all the other non-comic material that filled newspaper pages: news, congressional reports, poetry, ads, editorials, excerpts from exchange papers, and other miscellany.

Though most of the continuing comic characters in newspaper and periodicals eschewed the politics surrounding expansion, a few, like Jack Downing, were pointedly political. Downing was conceived as an ironic critic of Jacksonian Democracy. As a member of Jackson's "kitchen cabinet," Smith's Downing lampooned Jackson by purporting to advise him. Smith would later revive Jack Downing during the US–Mexico War as a confidant to another Democratic president, James K. Polk, reporting on progress of the war from the front in Mexico. In this incarnation, which originally appeared in the Washington Whig newspaper the *Daily National Intelligencer*, Downing exhibits a giddy fervor for "annexin'—clear to Cape Horn" (Smith 1859: 280)—that ultimately exposes expansion's inherent racism and logical contradictions.

Like Seba Smith, poet and antislavery activist James Russell Lowell critiqued the US–Mexico War and military expansion through ironic performances of it by bumbling, bigoted agents of imperialism. In his famous Biglow poems, which appeared in the Boston *Courier* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (and were reprinted widely elsewhere) between 1846 and 1848, Lowell's character Birdofredum Sawin is an unscrupulous New England volunteer who, wooed by recruiting rhetoric, originally "thought all Mexico was hisn" before learning the realities of on-the-ground-soldiering (Lowell 1847: 1). As his experiences in the war cure him of naivety, he transforms from a New England farm-boy lured by dreams of glory to a self-aware rogue seeking to take political advantage of his war wounds by running for political office.¹⁰

During and after the Civil War, editor David Ross Locke used a similar strategy in creating his signature character, Petroleum V. Nasby. Locke used Nasby—an uneducated, racist, Confederate-sympathizing political

opportunist—to undercut the logic of Northern Democrats advocating for a peace settlement with the Confederacy. Like Lowell's and Smith's satires, Nasby's ironic, widely reprinted newspaper burlesques in the Findlay (OH) *Jeffersonian* and the Toledo (OH) *Blade* were juxtaposed alongside news items about their satiric targets, thus setting up a curious dialogue between fictional satire and its real-world referents.

In addition to the comic character sketches of such literary comedians, nineteenth-century newspapers often ran regular columns of humorous miscellany featuring circulating jokes, anecdotes, *bon mots*, and even excerpts from comic writers and lecturers. Such items were so widespread that Ryan Cordell has listed humor as one of the "prominent threads" of reprinted texts in nineteenth-century newspapers identified by the Viral Texts Project algorithm (2015: 428–9). Newspaper accounts of comic lectures delivered by comedians initially made famous through their newspaper and periodical humor, such as Twain, Nasby, and Ward, also demonstrate the self-perpetuating circulation at work between the genres discussed in this chapter. All these media—comic almanacs, jest books, humor periodicals, comic lectures, and newspapers—featured the two major forms of nineteenth-century American humor: the joke and the sketch. In subsequent years, however, jokes and sketches (sometimes variations on the same old chestnuts) would find new life in new forms. Humor toward the end of the nineteenth century increasingly moved off the printed page and onto the stage and screen, as performative comic modes such as vaudeville, musical theater, and, eventually, radio, film, and television came increasingly to dominate the cultural landscape of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER TWO

Theory

Deadpan and Comedy Theory

SARAH BALKIN

Deadpan is a flat or neutral mode of performance that produces non-neutral responses, such as laughter. The first recorded use of the term was in a November 1927 issue of *Vanity Fair*, which explained that “poker-face” and “dead-pan” both mean “a lifeless facial expression” (Lighter 1994: 568). While the term is theatrical in origin, it quickly came to be associated with film: a 1928 New York *Times* article, “Slang of Film Men,” defined “dead pan” as “playing a role with an expressionless face” with reference to Buster Keaton’s signature style (Wilstach 1928: 112). But the gap between subject matter and style of delivery as a central aspect of comedy developed about a century earlier in a transatlantic context. Significant examples of proto-deadpan performance in the United States included the first American comic archetype, the stage Yankee of the 1830s; the “Mr. Interlocutor” figure of minstrelsy starting in the late 1840s or early 1850s; and the gravely delivered comic lectures of Artemus Ward in the 1860s. In England, the low comedian John Liston acted in a style that William Hazlitt described as “unconscious and involuntary” (Leech et al. 1975: 132); W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan introduced the hyperlogical execution of an absurd premise in their comic operas; and Oscar Wilde stipulated impassivity and expressionlessness in *An Ideal Husband*’s (1895) servant and dandy characters. The “feeder” (later, “straight man”) comedians of double acts in British music hall and American vaudeville further conventionalized serious delivery in comedy. These unconscious, earnest, and understated styles present an alternative to conventional narratives of the shift from melodramatic to

realist acting during the nineteenth century. By emphasizing the history and intentionality of comic impassivity, deadpan invites us to reconsider comedy's relationship to social and aesthetic norms.

Deadpan might reasonably be understood as an early part of the trajectory toward depthlessness that Fredric Jameson famously describes as the "waning of affect in postmodern culture" (1991: 10). But while postmodernism's explanatory power has waned in the twenty-first century, not least due to frustration with its habitual irony and reflexivity, deadpan remains ubiquitous in comedy.¹ Lauren Berlant reframes Jameson's trajectory in a way useful to an account of deadpan when she argues that our contemporary moment witnesses not the "waning of affect," but the waning of genre," by which she means melodrama: "Life can no longer be lived even phantasmatically as melodrama, as Aristotelian tragedy spread to ordinary people, as a predictable arc that is shaped by acts, facts, or fates" (2008: 7). Berlant is primarily interested in the rise and demise of melodrama as a prevalent cultural fantasy. My own interests are the overlapping but non-identical issue of how deadpan performance styles emerged, and how we can understand them without being stymied by reflexivity. I posit the period when historical theater genres shifted from melodrama toward realism as inaugurating deadpan as a mode of performance. Victorian melodrama already constituted a shift toward the representation of ordinary life, with its colloquial dialogue and focus on common people. But melodrama's investment in physiognomic legibility and its imperative to "tell all" are antithetical to deadpan performance. Melodrama proceeds on principles of expression and exposure, whereas deadpan relies on gaps among modes and tones of expression and what they conventionally express. Like the realist acting that developed alongside stage naturalism during this period, deadpan relies on the idea of characterological concealment: what is on the surface conveys something beyond it. But deadpan also complicates the idea that the "something beyond" the surface performance is interiority, since the point of deadpan performance is not usually to communicate character motive or hidden truths. Deadpan delivery can indicate that a character or performer's true feelings are the opposite of what they say, but it can just as easily render true feeling opaque, or make an audience question its existence. Thus, deadpan can help us rethink relationships among realism, modern comedy, and the understated modes of performance that transformed them.

This chapter considers deadpan's historical emergence in light of comedy theory, giving particular attention to theories that bracket the nineteenth century: the "incongruity theory" that arose during the eighteenth century, in which "some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our standard mental patterns and normal expectations" (Morreall 2016: n.p.), and Henri Bergson's understanding of the comic as "something mechanical encrusted upon the living" ([1900] 2003: 49). Both of these theories (or schools of

thought, since the incongruity theory names a trend rather than a particular theorist) are centrally engaged with norms and expectations. Deadpan, I contend, emerged in relation to, and sometimes as a parody of, socially central norms such as earnestness and respectability. Deadpan as such involves varied performances of normalcy. Prominent among the aesthetic norms from which deadpan distinguishes itself is melodrama, which Northrop Frye called “comedy without the humor” (1957: 167). As Frye’s comment suggests, comedy theory, like criticism generally, reflects the tastes of the critics who wrote it. These tastes are themselves of interest to an account of deadpan, which frequently renders classed and racialized norms such as composure and respectability a source of humor. But they also suggest the usefulness of putting comedy theory in dialogue with particular case studies, evinced by ephemera such as playbills and sheet music as well as early photography and recordings, reviews, and playtexts. Related to the issue of critical taste is the fact that, during the nineteenth century, critical frameworks for theorizing comedy, like the conventions of comic acting, were better established in England and Europe than in the United States. But the emergence of deadpan performance styles was a transatlantic phenomenon, with some of its breakthrough moments identifiably American.² For these reasons, I consider accounts of comic performance styles by actors, comedians, writers, and directors alongside traditional comedy theory.

INCONGRUITY AND SERIOUS HUMOR

The incongruity theory is one of three main theories of humor, the other two being the superiority theory and the relief theory. The superiority theory holds that “laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people or over a former state of ourselves” (Morreall 2016: n.p.).³ This idea, which understands humor as an expression of power relations, dominated Western thinking from antiquity to the eighteenth century and is associated with Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes. Laughter, Hobbes writes in *Leviathan*, is caused “by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves” ([1651] 2018: 48–9). The superiority theory’s explanatory force diminished when Francis Hutcheson pointed out in 1750 that it is possible to feel superior without laughing, and to laugh without feeling superior.⁴ The relief theory and the incongruity theory emerged during this period. The former, associated with Lord Shaftesbury, Herbert Spencer, and Sigmund Freud, understands laughter as a steam valve for pent-up nervous energy. In “The Physiology of Laughter,” Spencer subordinates the superiority and incongruity theories to the bodily, affective workings of laughter, which he defines as “a display of muscular excitement” that can be produced by “strong feeling of almost any kind” ([1860] 1875: 200). “Suppression of external signs of feeling,” Spencer adds, “makes feeling more intense” ([1860] 1875: 199). Spencer’s

discussion of this dynamic touches on proto-deadpan modes of comic delivery. Noting that people who conceal their anger become more revengeful than those who express it, Spencer adds, “Similarly, men who, as proved by their powers of representation, have the keenest appreciation of the comic, are usually able to do and say the most ludicrous things with perfect gravity” ([1860] 1875: 199). Where “bodily activity deadens emotion” ([1860] 1875: 199) for those who feel it, funny people often use their own composure to intensify humor for others.

The incongruity theory, associated with James Beattie, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Søren Kierkegaard, among others, suggests humor results when expectations are raised and then violated. For example, in Kant’s formulation, laughter is “an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing” ([1790] 1911: 199). Kant implicitly includes tone among the means of straining an expectation when he notes that a humorous tale “told with an air of seriousness would of itself be enough to set a whole table into roars of laughter” ([1790] 1911: 201). The incongruity between the expectations raised by the serious tone of voice and the humorous content of the tale inspire laughter. As the resonance between Kant’s and Spencer’s comments on serious delivery suggest, it is important not to impose absolute conceptual and historical distinctions between the theories of humor, which often overlap. Indeed, Daniel Wickberg argues that the tripartite division of humor is a twentieth-century coinage that has “removed laughter from history” (1998: 47). Nonetheless, incongruity became the dominant theory over the course of the nineteenth century and remains a leading explanation of how humor works. The incongruity theory is also germane to an account of deadpan’s emergence insofar as it relies centrally on norms—the raised and thwarted expectations that sometimes result in laughter—in ways that deadpan’s performance of seriousness invokes and inverts.

In *The World as Will and Representation*, Arthur Schopenhauer writes that “the opposite of laughing and joking is *seriousness*” ([1818] 1896: 280).⁵ Seriousness consists “in the perfect agreement and congruity of the conception, or thought, with what is perceived, or the reality” ([1818] 1896: 280). And yet the serious man is quick to laugh because the more perfect the agreement of thought and reality is assumed to be, the more readily that agreement can be destroyed by “even a slight incongruity” ([1818] 1896: 281). Thus, even as Schopenhauer casts seriousness and laughter as opposites, he also understands them as interacting. Jokes involve the intentional “effort to bring about a discrepancy between the conceptions of another and the reality by disarranging one of the two . . . but if now the joke is concealed behind seriousness, then we have *irony*” ([1818] 1896: 281). The idea of a joke concealed behind seriousness is Schopenhauer’s closest approach to something we might now call deadpan. As an example of this dynamic he describes a situation in which “with apparent seriousness we acquiesce in the opinions of another which are the opposite of our own, and pretend to share them with him, till at last the result perplexes him

both as to us and them” ([1818] 1896: 281). The example is intriguing because the person pretending acquiescence (“we”) never breaks character—at no point do we announce our true feelings or intentions, as a character in a melodrama might (Williams 2012: 207)—and because it posits a possible change of opinion as a result of the performance of seriousness, which in this instance is also a performance of agreement. The person we have pretended to agree with ends up confused about us, but also doubting their own opinions. Schopenhauer’s description of a joke concealed behind seriousness and its capacity to shift opinion suggests the political potential of deadpan’s performance of seriousness. In her introduction to *The Victorian Comic Spirit*, Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor links the political significance of Victorian humor to its capacity for “unmasking and exposure,” citing Edwin Hood’s 1852 assertion of “*the detective power of ridicule and mirth*” (2000: xv, emphasis in original). But although the joke concealed behind seriousness does invoke a logic of depth and surface, the mask in Schopenhauer’s example induces change by remaining in place.



FIGURE 2.1: Portrait of William Hazlitt from a miniature by John Hazlitt, 1800. Photo by Culture Club / Getty Images.

In the same year that Schopenhauer published *The World as Will and Representation*, Hazlitt delivered a series of lectures on English comic writers, which were printed immediately thereafter. The first of these, “On Wit and Humour,” describes the incongruous as “the essence of the laughable” ([1819] 1969: 4). For Hazlitt, “the serious is the habitual stress which the mind lays upon the expectation of a given order of events,” and “the ludicrous, or comic, is the unexpected loosening or relaxing this stress below its usual pitch of intensity” ([1819] 1969: 4). But, like Schopenhauer, Hazlitt also discusses seriousness performed for humorous ends:

Again, unconsciousness in the person himself in what he is about, or of what others think of him, is also a great heightener of the sense of absurdity . . . It is a more extreme case still where the person is aware of being the object of ridicule, and yet seems perfectly reconciled to it as a matter of course. So wit is often the more forcible and pointed for being dry and serious, for it then seems as if the speaker himself had no intention in it, and we were the first to find it out.

—[1819] 1969: 8

The split Hazlitt identifies between “being the object of ridicule” and seeming “perfectly reconciled to it,” as well as the appearance of having “no intention,” are common to deadpan and proto-deadpan performance styles. Indeed, “unconsciousness” is a frequent descriptor in nineteenth-century accounts of performers who scholars have retrospectively labelled “deadpan.” Both Schopenhauer and Hazlitt align seriousness with congruity, and with meeting expectations—which is to say, normativity. The ways in which seriousness can be deployed for comic ends, as a heightener of absurdity and an intensifier of its effects, suggest how the increasing dominance of the incongruity theory of humor reflects and predicts the emergence of proto-deadpan performance styles.

Kierkegaard’s interest is not in deploying the serious for comic ends, but rather the reverse. Although he discusses humor extensively, his writing on the subject is not much concerned with comic genres or styles; as Will Williams notes, following Sylvia Walsh, Kierkegaard “reinterprets aesthetic categories as existential categories” (2018: 4). In *Training in Christianity*, his pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, describes “the unity of jest and earnest” as a mode of indirect communication ([1850] 1967: 125).⁶ As Kierkegaard’s frequent use of pseudonymous authorship suggests, he finds indirect communication conducive to the philosophical and theological aims of his writing. One such pseudonym, Johannes Climacus of the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* ([1846] 1941), calls himself a humorist. For Johannes Climacus the tragic and the comic are both based in contradiction, by which he denotes incongruity. But, he writes, “*the tragic is the suffering contradiction, the comical, the painless contradiction*”

([1846] 1941: 459, emphasis in original). A “legitimate comic apprehension” provides a “way out” ([1846] 1941: 466, 463) of the contradiction. Comic apprehension does not remove contradiction from the world, since that is impossible, but rather renders contradiction “painless because it is viewed as cancelled” ([1846] 1941: 466). Comic apprehension, then, is bound up with subjectivity. In this respect, it is a “willing servant” ([1846] 1941: 467) to the “hidden inwardness” necessary to religiosity. As Stephen N. Dunning discusses, Kierkegaard’s conception of subjectivity or inwardness is not a “private emotionalism” that rejects objective reality altogether; “it is, rather, the individual’s struggle inwardly to become rightly related to reality” (Dunning 1985: 184, 185). Understood in this way, comic apprehension can facilitate the individual’s right relation to reality. Kierkegaard thus positions the comic as compatible with serious moral purpose, even as “the religiosity of hidden inwardness is *eo ipso* inaccessible to comic apprehension” ([1846] 1941: 465). Kierkegaard’s nuanced writing on the comic distances earnestness from emotional styles as well as aesthetic categories. In so doing, it cautions us against seeing earnestness as naïve, a subject to which I will return in my discussion of English deadpan. It further suggests the complexities of deadpan’s own unity of jest and earnest, which often gestures toward inwardness it then refuses to deliver.

TRANSATLANTIC INCONGRUITIES: THE YANKEE, THE MINSTREL, AND THE PLATFORM COMEDIAN

The transatlantic circulation of plays and performers during the nineteenth century contributed to the development of deadpan style. In the United States, proto-deadpan modes of performance are discernible in the first American comic archetype, the stage Yankee. Yankee plays appeared in the 1820s and became especially popular in the 1830s (Blair 1960: 23; see also Rourke 1931: 16; Hodge 1964: 276).⁷ Industrialization and westward expansion during this period changed the composition of theater audiences, the position of the American actor, and programming, as theaters sought to entertain larger numbers of workers and new city migrants (Hodge 1964: 37–8). So although Yankee characters tended to be country boys “somewhat after the models of Yorkshiremen, so happily conceived and delineated by the authors of English comedy” (Hill 1853: 74), urbanization facilitated their proliferation on the stage. During his American tour in 1822–3, the English dialect comedian Charles Mathews, who was known for vaudeville-type one-man shows that included songs, skits, and monologues, inspired the American comedian James Hackett with his “galleries of realistically conceived national types” (Hodge 1964: 61). Hackett’s December 3, 1828, New York City performance in *John Bull at Home, or Jonathan in England* launched what Frances Hodge calls “Yankee theatre”—a body of plays featuring the Yankee character, developed

and performed by specialist comedians in the type” (1964: 102). By creating roles for American actors, stage Yankees intervened in the English-actor tradition (1964: 7) even as they benefited from English models including Mathews’ national types, the Yorkshireman, and the low comedian John Liston, who has been described as “deadpan” by contemporary critics (Marker and Marker in Leech et al. 1975: 132; Davis 2015: 62). Indeed, following Liston’s hugely popular performance in *Paul Pry* (1825), Yankee actors such as Hackett and James Hilson played the title role in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia during the 1820s and 1830s (Hodge 1964: 142; Davis 2015: 62–3).

The period that shaped the stage Yankee also saw the development of more realistic staging practices and performance styles. The most famous stage Yankee, George Handel Hill (or “Yankee” Hill), was praised for his fidelity to the peculiarities of Yankee dialect and expression (Collier 1958: 92), including the proto-deadpan propensity to “tell a ridiculous story without apparent knowledge of its point” (Rourke 1931: 7). During Hill’s 1837 tour of England, Scotland, and Ireland, his portrayal of a Yankee peddler was repeatedly praised for its coolness, chasteness, and quiet impudence as well as its accuracy (see, for example, Northall 1850: 64, 65, 67, 69; Hodge 1964: 199–201). Hodge notes that “some critics thought Hill’s humor almost too quiet for an English public, that he should at least speak a little more loudly and not drop his voice when he came to the essential words of a joke” (1964: 199). This dropping of the voice at the point of the punchline is another proto-deadpan characteristic of the stage Yankee. “Incidentally,” Hodge adds, it was during the season of Hill’s 1836 London debut in *The Yankee Pedlar* “that Madame Vestris introduced London to the realistic box setting, with its rugs, drapes, and everyday furniture” (1964: 199). In conjunction with the “conversational tone and drawing-room quietness” (Leech et al. 1975: 132) of the acting at Vestris’ popular and fashionable Olympic Theatre, Hill’s success shows English and American audiences’ readiness for more subdued forms of comedy.

Hill and other Yankee actors also told stories and gave comic lectures in their Yankee personas. In this way, the Yankee also contributed to deadpan’s emergence via parodies of serious rhetorical genres. Hill’s widely performed “Lecture on New England” and other Yankee lectures developed concurrently with the American lyceum movement, whereby the “white Protestant northeastern middle class . . . institutionalized the practice of public debating and public lecturing for education and moral uplift” (Ray 2005: 2). During the 1860s, the white New Englander Artemus Ward brought the burlesque lecture to a new level by delivering it gravely. The Ward persona, developed in newspaper sketches, was a traveling Yankee showman. Ward’s written sketches were clearly descended from Yankee dialect comedy, but this aspect of his humor fell away in his performed lectures. On the platform Ward “spoke earnestly,” with a “grave demeanor” that suggested a modest, Emersonian type (Branch 1978: 968).

Ward gave his “Babes in the Wood” lecture during the seasons of 1861–2 and 1863–4 (Branch 1978: 957), which spanned the Civil War. The central conceit of this lecture is that Ward never gets around to talking about the babes in the wood; at the end of the lecture he explicitly notes that his time has elapsed without getting to his subject. The signature traits of Ward’s emergent deadpan, then, are gravity and digression. Where the former was characteristic of the lyceum lecture genre, suggesting the ways Ward embodied its norms, the latter departed from the lyceum genre, or rather depicted Ward as incompetent. Indeed, Ward’s business manager, Edward P. Hingston, described the style of Ward’s comic delivery as a “studied incoherency” (1870: 207), and some audience members thought him merely incompetent.

Lyceum lectures were also widely parodied in blackface minstrel shows, the popularity of which is difficult to overstate. Magnetism, phrenology, and women’s rights were common topics for these burlesque lectures (Mahar 1999: 59–60). The prevalence of phrenology lectures suggests another English antecedent to American deadpan in George Alexander Stevens’ comic *Lecture on Heads* (1764), a popular parody of the fashion for physiognomy that toured Great Britain, Ireland, and the American colonies.⁸ These overlapping theatrical,



FIGURE 2.2: An 1878 engraving of American humorist Artemus Ward (Charles Farrar Browne). Photo by Print Collector / Getty Images.

rhetorical, comic, and serious genres, some of which also circulated in print via collections of comic stories and lectures, suggest the usefulness of Jacky Bratton's concept of intertheatricality, which looks beyond the specific occasion of a performance to include "the whole web of mutual understanding between potential audiences and their players, a sense of the knowledge, or better the knowingness, about playing that spans a lifetime or more, and that is activated for all participants during the performance event" (2003: 37). "Knowingness" was itself a comic style characteristic of British music hall, which I will discuss in the following section. An intertheatrical reading, Bratton adds, "seeks to articulate the mesh of connections between all kinds of theatre texts, and between texts and their users" (2003: 37). The mesh of connections that contributed to deadpan performance styles involved not only parodies of serious genres, but also developments and derivations of earlier and concurrent comic genres and styles. Comic and serious lectures were often held in the same venues, and Yankee and minstrel performers often occupied the same stages and productions, particularly during the years before the minstrel show was formalized as a genre involving a full evening's entertainment. Indeed, Hill more than once published combined collections of Yankee stories and negro lectures, suggesting significant overlap in audiences and readerships.⁹

The minstrel figure most germane to deadpan performance was the interlocutor, the onstage master of ceremonies in minstrel shows. In 1843, Dan Emmett's Manhattan-based Virginia Minstrels established the minstrel show as a genre by expanding the form from a solo novelty act to a full evening of ensemble singing and dancing (Lott 1993: 136). Mr. Interlocutor appeared in the first act of what came, in the 1850s, to be the conventional structure of the minstrel show, the first part of which featured a semicircular arrangement of the performers: the interlocutor, or middleman, was flanked by minstrel performers including the endmen, Bones and Tambo, who played the bones and tambourine, respectively.¹⁰ The interlocutor directed the onstage action and functioned as a "bogus mouthpiece for the high culture" (Saxton in Bean et al. 1996: 72). The interlocutor is often in hindsight called the minstrel show's straight man, though Alexander Saxton describes the style of the interlocutor's parodies as "sometimes straight, more often burlesqued" (Bean et al. 1996: 72). The nineteenth-century theatrical manager, critic, and historian T. Alston Brown described the interlocutor as "always the same genial, gentlemanly, unruffled creature surveying the endmen," with the comedy coming from his superiority as well as the perceived contrast between his "ebony makeup" and lack of "darky dialect" (quoted in Toll 1974: 53, 64 n. 63). The humor, that is, came from the perceived incongruity between skin color, speech, and deportment.¹¹ The interlocutor's genial, gentlemanly, and unruffled qualities align him with the under-responsiveness of proto-deadpan comic performers as well as a version of the respectability characteristic of a significant strain of English deadpan, which I

will discuss at length in the next section. But the interlocutor was also the butt of jokes by the endmen, Bones and Tambo. As such, his relationship to knowledge and culture might be said to invert that of the shrewd, homebred stage Yankee, and to support what Berlant describes as “the conventional whiteness of deadpan” (2015: 197), in contrast to stereotyped representations of African Americans as “excessively ‘lively’” (Ngai 2005: 12) or “creatures of feeling” (Lott 1993: 32).

Iterations of these conventions are apparent in minstrel companies’ reception, and in the troupes’ own graphic depictions of performers. From the start, minstrel bands were noted for their respectability relative to the existing blackface entertainments familiar to American audiences. A *New York Herald* review of the first performance by Emmet’s Virginia Minstrels described them as a “grotesque, original, and surprisingly melodious Ethiopian band . . . entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have hitherto characterized negro extravaganzas” (quoted in Nathan 1962: 132). Respectability also characterized Edwin P. Christy’s highly popular Buffalo-based troupe, which was formed in 1842 and split in two in 1857, with one branch departing for England and the other remaining in the United States (Davis 2013: 44). In England, Tracy Davis notes, the troupe were noted for

“gentlemanly conduct and the extremely fastidious character of their entertainment,” . . . as distinct from the crass minstrels who overpopulated stages at this time. At the outset of each concert, Christy’s Minstrels presented themselves as impeccably dressed gentlemen in evening dress, despite the blackface and short wigs. In other words, their appearance was more like the spectators in the stalls or abolitionist lecturers who contrasted their bondage narratives with a transformative sartorial impression.

—2013: 46

A playbill advertising the American branch of Christy’s Minstrels, which in 1847 became the resident company at New York City’s Mechanics’ Hall, likewise invokes the gentlemanliness of its performers: the bill shows them lined up out of blackface, composed and in evening dress, at the top, and then in blackface with more varied costumes below. Eric Lott links the practice of representing minstrel performers both in and out of costume on sheet music from the same period to the frequency with which early audiences “suspected that they were being entertained by actual Negroes” (1993: 20). But the evening dress was also a costume aligned with respectability, as the Virginia Minstrels’ English reception, Davis’s description of abolitionist lecturers’ sartorial choices, and the Christy’s playbill suggest. Indeed, playbills and illustrated sheet music from the period show that evening dress became a ubiquitous costume in minstrel shows, contrasting with the ragged or outlandish attire of plantation scenes. This is the

MECHANICS' HALL!
 NO. 473 BROADWAY, BETWEEN GRAND AND BROOME STREETS.
OPEN EVERY NIGHT DURING THE WEEK!

CHRISTY'S



MINSTRELS

THE OLDEST ESTABLISHED COMPANY IN THE WORLD.
 The First to introduce Negro Minstrelsy, and originators of the present popular form of Minstrelsy.
 Minstrelsy, whose success is due to the fact that the past master of the art, is now
 presented to the world of Public Amusement in the most complete
 and perfect form of their original work and achievement.

The Company.
 UNDER THE DIRECTION AND MANAGEMENT OF E. A. CHRISTY.

WEDNESDAY EVENING, Sept. 19, 1849.
PROGRAMME - PART I.

Madley Overture Full Band
 Noah's Wedding Day, from the Opera of Isaac E. F. Christy
 Come with me, my Noah dear E. F. Christy
 Sleep that knocking, awakened with Buggy and light, from the Minstrelsy Company
 Father's Bride George Christy
 Snow-Like, or don't be foolish John E. F. Christy
 yreaham Solo, displaying a facility and volume of voice truly astonishing and
 infinite resources Christian
 Phantasm Chorus, to the Society's Ignorance, how is it overcome Company
 Masquerade Waltz, with three steps and Immense Salutation Company

VOYAGE MUSICAL
 Commencing "Somewhere" and ending "Where 'tis done," comprising a
 variety of **AIRS** for the orchestra. To the full effect in the most beautiful way.

The celebrated and **DISTIN** guished performers in the
SIX-HORNS
 Will perform a grand **POT POURRI** &c.
 For a full appreciation of the above **UNPARALLELED** MINSTREL ENTERTAINMENT, much will
 have been in depending on the imagination of the audience.

After which, the celebrated **SOLO** from the Piece of
"LINDA DI CHAMOUNI,"
 composed by MARCONI, and sung by Miss LORRINE, will be "Presented" by the
 Prima Donna of the Troupe. **M. LORRINE**
Musical Director & Conductor. . . Signor Johnson

ADDITIONAL SOLO A. DONNELLY
WILL LEE LONE GEORGE CHRISTY
THOMAS PAUL BURLING E. F. CHRISTY
SONNET-BALLAD DUET, with Solo, "Belshazzar" Christian & Sover




PART II. Representing the present Characteristics of the South, in the Minstrelsy
Characteristic Solo Song E. F. Christy
Solo Duet E. F. Christy & T. Vaughn
That Good Old Gum, Gum Vaughn, Hays, Upson & George Christy
Sugar Cane Band E. F. Christy
Lift by the Galley Fire E. F. Christy
The Minstrelsy do little Company
Baritone Lectures on Minstrelsy W. Porter & George Christy
Down in Carolina, introducing Specimens of Minstrelsy
Stairway Geo. Christy and E. F. Christy

ADMISSION 25 CENTS.
 Doors open at 7. To commence at 8 o'clock precisely.
AN AFTERNOON CONCERT EVERY SATURDAY,
 commencing at 2 o'clock.

FIGURE 2.3: Playbill for Christy's Minstrels at the Mechanics' Hall, New York City, 1849. MS Thr 566 (321). Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

case on the Christy's playbill, where evening dress is retained in some of the illustrations of performers in blackface, though with greater animation of their bodies in each instance (American Minstrel Show Collection, Houghton Library Blog 2010: n.p.). Similarly, 1844 sheet music featuring the Virginia Serenaders shows a line of blacked, costumed performers with their instruments, sitting with legs apart, feet tapping and arms gesturing, at the top of the page (Lott 1993: 21). Beneath them are the performers out of blackface, in suits, standing, with a much more subdued and respectable gestural vocabulary: hands are at the performers' waists, in breast pockets, or holding a top hat. These depictions of minstrel performers in and out of blackface demonstrate the classed and racialized ideas about animatedness and composure that helped make the interlocutor funny, and that informed deadpan's performance of normalcy. In this context, we might align the eveningwear itself with proto-deadpan performance styles.

The meanings and politics of deadpan's stylistic invocation of normalcy vary depending on who performs it, and how, and in what context. This is apparent in the performances of black minstrel duo Bert Williams and George Walker, who performed together in vaudeville and musical comedies from 1893 until 1909, when Walker's health declined. (Williams went on to join the Ziegfeld Follies as a featured performer in an otherwise all-white show.) Walker was the straight man (Chude-Sokei 2006: 23), but it was Williams who wore the minstrel mask. In his 1918 essay, "The Comic Side of Trouble," Williams notes that he began blacking his face "just for a lark" and was surprised to discover that "it went like a house on fire. Then I began to find myself" (2005: 18). Williams' account of finding himself in blackface is remarkable in many respects; for one, he was a West Indian immigrant to whom the conventions of American minstrelsy were absurd and unfamiliar. To perform in and against the minstrel tradition, Williams "took to studying the dialect of the American negro, which to me was just as much a foreign dialect as that of the Italian" (Williams 2005: 18). That Williams and Walker performed against as well as in the minstrel tradition is apparent in Walker's 1906 essay, "The Real 'Coon' on the American Stage," which notes that in their first successful run they realized "the one hope of the colored performer must be in making a radical departure from the old 'darky' style of singing and dancing" (Williams and Walker 2004: 18). Other comments in "The Comic Side of Trouble" help to clarify what Williams means by finding himself: "It was not until I was able to see myself as another person that my sense of humor developed. For I do not believe there is any such thing as innate humor . . . I have studied it all my life, unconsciously during my floundering years, and consciously as soon as I began to get next to myself" (Williams 2005: 12). Based on these comments, Louis Chude-Sokei sees "the very process of masking as one in which the self is not banished, obfuscated, or erased; instead it is multiplied, and its self-consciousness rendered prismatic" (2006: 25).

Williams conflates finding himself with finding his comic persona, a process that involves getting “next to” himself, or seeing himself as another person. But the hard-luck stage persona Williams developed was built on a reflexive sort of erasure: his signature song was “Nobody” (1905), the chorus of which ran:

I ain’t never done nothin’ to nobody,
I ain’t never got nothin’ from nobody, no time!
And until I get somethin’ from somebody, sometime,
I don’t intend to do nothin’ for nobody, no time!

As Michelle Ann Stephens notes, the joke “rests on whether there is *somebody* in the song,” which posits uncertain agencies—“the idea of a *nobody* or *not-body* performing, an incorporeal black subject appearing and disappearing in flashes of presence and absence, as literalized in the profusion of double negatives” (2014: 51). One way to understand Williams’ blackface is as



FIGURE 2.4: Entertainer Bert Williams in his “Nobody” persona, 1922. Photo by Library of Congress / Getty Images.

functioning analogously to his “nobody” persona—i.e., as a double negative or, better, a double positive that gestures toward minstrelsy’s tradition of incongruity between mask and skin. In Williams’ case, the congruity and incongruity of mask and skin are the joke. Thus, Tina Post argues that Williams’ performances encourage us to recognize the ways in which the makeup itself acts, rendering his “self-evaporation . . . a strategy of black excess: rather than blacking allowing an actor to hide, hiding allowed blacking to act” (2015: 89). Williams’ use of blackface resonates with Schopenhauer’s example of the mask that induces change by remaining in place. Perhaps what Williams shows us about deadpan, then, is how the over-animated mask can itself gesture toward an under-responsiveness that does something: in Williams’ case, an acquiescence to the norms of a comic genre that he unsettled by being and not being what it imitated.

ENGLISH DEADPAN

English precursors to deadpan acting styles were bound up with realism and respectability, characteristics that also often accorded with the tastes of English critics. In 1807, Leigh Hunt aligns himself with the emerging incongruity theory of comedy when he writes that “comedy deals much in equivocation, the humour of which is enforced by the opposite expression of look and tone, or by an agreement of both differing from the speech” (1894: 23). Hunt twice invokes the realist fourth wall in his discussion of comic actors. The low comedian John Bannister, he writes, “engages your attention immediately by seeming to care nothing about you. The stage appears to be his own room, of which the audience compose the fourth wall: if they clap him, he does not stand still to enjoy their applause; he continues the action, if he cannot continue the dialogue” (1894: 30). Hunt admired Bannister for his “propriety” (Davis 2015: 38); his description thus shows an early alignment of a more respectable strain of low comic acting with the realist fourth wall, though Hunt described Bannister’s expression as one of “jovial honesty, or . . . *heartiness*” (Hunt 1894: 30, emphasis in original).¹² In contrast, Hunt describes actress Jane Pope, who specialized in soubrette roles in her youth and frumps and eccentrics in her later career (Davis 2015: 136–7), as possessing a humor “of that dry sort which a person of little judgment might mistake for seriousness” (Hunt 1894: 77). For Pope, as for Bannister, the stage “appears to be her own room” (1894: 77). Moreover, Hunt attributes to “Miss Pope” the gendered combination of “unaffected nature” and “manners” that also came to be associated with the idealized Victorian gentlewoman; indeed, he calls her “the only natural performer of the old gentlewoman” (1894: 78). Hunt’s descriptions of Bannister and Pope are revealing of his taste, but they also show comedy’s relationship to realism and respectability even before the advent of the realist box set.

A counterpoint to the unconsciousness and respectability of proto-deadpan performance styles was the “knowing style” that characterized British music

hall, which emerged in the 1830s and 1840s. John Liston's comic acting was relevant to the development of both styles, for, while Hazlitt described Liston's acting as "unconscious and involuntary," Peter Bailey also positions Liston as a progenitor of knowingness, based on Hazlitt's description of Liston's cockney roles. "To Hazlitt," Bailey writes, "the knowingness of the cockney was the delusion of someone who, on the contrary, really knew nothing" (1994: 144). The style interpolated the audience via exchanges that invoked "the language of the street and the market-place" to signal "a common yet inside knowledge" (1994: 145, 146). By the 1880s, such "unscripted exchanges across the footlights" caused anxiety about vulgarity as music halls laid claim to "greater social and aesthetic respectability" (1994: 155, 156). Bailey thus positions knowingness as a stylistic counterpoint to the "language of respectability, even as the latter became more firmly installed in the formal practice of music-hall as both business and profession" (1994: 156). Like knowingness, deadpan relies on the audience's understanding, but as a style it tends to sustain the appearance of earnestness, innocence, or respectability. The strain of English proto-deadpan performance styles I trace below aligns with middle-class and high-society tastes. While an extended discussion of music hall is beyond the scope of this chapter, my hypothesis is that the music hall or variety stage became more conducive to deadpan in the 1880s, when its "shouting style" gave way to a "more conversational" if still "strongly accented" mode of performance (Bailey 1994: 157). This is consistent with the first recorded use of the term "feeder" comedian in 1886, though, as with other terms associated with popular theater, it likely circulated earlier.¹³

The strain of English deadpan I will discuss for the remainder of this chapter emerged via a parody of Victorian earnestness that rendered visible and risible the work of selflessness. In *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870*, Walter E. Houghton notes that "the importance of being earnest was first recognized . . . on the threshold of the Victorian era" (1957: 218). But like Victorian realism, earnestness was not naïve. Houghton associates earnestness with selflessness or self-denial and the Victorian "gospel of work," on which a secularizing population increasingly relied for a sense that their lives had meaning (1957: 251). Earnestness was not a state of nature, but a work of intellectual and moral seriousness that must be achieved and maintained, as the title of Wilde's most famous play suggests. S.I. Salamensky describes earnestness "as the propensity to ensure that substance and surface, matter and word, belief and discourse cohere" (Bennett 2015: 194). The work of ensuring this coherence, I suggest, was increasingly an object of humor, particularly in the nineteenth century's most mimetic forms. That serious moral purpose met humorous delivery in the dry narration of nineteenth-century realist novels is well understood. Thus my aim is not to assert that the Victorians were "faking" their moral seriousness, but rather to consider the history and stakes of maintaining a tone. In their edited

collection, *Politics, Performance and Popular Culture: Theatre and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Peter Yeandle, Katherine Newey, and Jeffrey Richards suggest:

Karen Halttunen's study of the anxieties around social interaction in mid-century America holds true for Britain as well when she argues that the construction of "the skilled performance of middle-class gentility" undercut the sentimental investment in authenticity and sincerity. So the "quest for sincerity of form thus inevitably turned and destroyed itself, for when sincerity became a matter of style or fashion, sentimental typology was rendered meaningless."

—2016: 11

But this formulation resurrects the logic of naïve realism, which never existed among serious novelists (see Levine 1981), at the level of emotional styles. It would be silly to disagree with the idea that the fashions for sentiment, sincerity, and earnestness gave way to other emotional styles, but to understand something as a style or a performance is not to render it meaningless, even (or perhaps especially) when the thing is authenticity.

The skilled performance of gentility and respectability were nonetheless foundational to emergent English deadpan. We can think again of the "conversational tone and drawing-room quietness" (Leech et al. 1975: 132) of the acting at the Olympic Theatre during the 1830s, where light comedian Charles James Mathews performed with "imperturbable solemnity" ("Mathews, Charles" 1911: 887). To attribute drawing-room qualities to nineteenth-century theater is to note its respectability; for example, Jane Moody describes actor Charles Mathews Senior's popular solo entertainments, known as his "At Homes," as bringing "into the illegitimate theatre . . . the gentility of the private drawing room" early in the century (Davis 2015: 202). Russell Jackson likewise describes the St. James's Theatre, where *The Importance of Being Earnest* was first staged in 1895, as "a theatre as well-ordered as a drawing room, with acting and staging whose quality was achieved with the expenditure of immense craft and care but which never drew attention to the effort it required" (1997: 162). Actor-manager George Alexander borrowed furniture from Frank Giles & Co. and supplied furniture from his own home to create this effect. While *The Importance of Being Earnest* was a farce, visual stage realism was central to its aim of materializing an imaginary person named Ernest (see Balkin 2016: 34). The quieter, de-theatricalized strain of comedy that helped launch English deadpan emerged alongside and sometimes as a parody of the stage realism that developed at the same time.

In England as in the United States, comic genres and burlesques that imitated the manner of serious works facilitated the development of deadpan performance

styles. In his 1892 tract *The Art of Acting*, Percy Fitzgerald cites burlesque as an example of what he calls the “double intention” in acting. Fitzgerald sees the gap between meaning and utterance as providing the interest of social intercourse as well as humor (1892: 97–8). He writes:

Thus a person says something complimentary, but his *tone* conveys the reverse: that is irony, or sarcasm. Another may utter his thoughts solemnly, in a grave tone, and yet the speech may be frivolous—that is burlesque: or *vice versa*. If we all lived in a *palace of truth*, and were forced to speak exactly as we felt, all this social intercourse would vanish . . . We see this when we meet what are called *matter-of-fact persons*, who, as Charles Lamb says, “make every statement as if upon oath.”

—1892: 98–9, emphasis in original

Fitzgerald’s focus on tone of voice points to its importance as a register of feeling and intention in performance, which he frames as a form of social interaction. Neither comedy nor social interaction can occur in the face of a matter-of-fact person whose tone of voice leaves no gap between meaning and utterance.

Fitzgerald’s “palace of truth” alludes to W.S. Gilbert’s 1870 blank verse fairy play of the same name. Gilbert’s fairy comedies of the early 1870s, which were written for and produced by the Haymarket Theatre, involve self-revelation by characters under supernatural influence. The central conceit of *The Palace of Truth* is that when one enters the eponymous palace, one must say exactly what one feels. But because the characters are unaware they are doing so, their tones and manners of expression comically contrast with the content of their speech. For example, Azema, a visitor to the palace, announces to Prince Philamir, “I am not frightened, though I seem to be.” Immediately thereafter the stage directions specify, “*Azema’s manner is characterised by the extremest modesty and timidity throughout this scene*” (Gilbert 187?: 27). The contrast between verbal composure and timid manner mocks the supposedly natural timidity of women as calculated artifice. Gilbert’s 1877 farce, *Engaged*, relies in a different way on the tonal gap that Fitzgerald describes as the double intention. Gilbert famously advised his actors in *Engaged*:

It is absolutely essential to the success of this piece that it should be played with the most perfect earnestness and gravity throughout. There should be no exaggeration in costume, make-up or demeanour; and the characters, one and all, should appear to believe, throughout, in the perfect sincerity of their words and actions. Directly the actors show that they are conscious of the absurdity of their utterances the piece begins to drag.

—Donohue 2004: 20



FIGURE 2.5: George Grossmith as John Wellington Wells in *The Sorcerer* at the Savoy Theatre, London, England, 1884–5. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Gilbert's advice to his actors in *Engaged* is consistent with what became the signature style of the Savoy operas he developed with Arthur Sullivan. Studio photographs of the 1877 cast of *The Sorcerer*, the first full-length Savoy opera, show the actors posing with unsmiling or downplayed expressions relative to the actors in *Trial by Jury* (1875), the one-act comic opera that preceded it.¹⁴ *The Sorcerer* was much discussed in the press for introducing the company's signature performance style of "restraint," "repose," and "decorousness," in contrast to the presentational style audiences expected (Goron 2016: 171).

Joseph Donohue argues that although Gilbert's advice to his actors is "sometimes cited as evidence of the emergence of 'realistic' acting," it is actually about maintaining "the illusion of virtual life on the stage" and not "blunting the sharp edges of their dialogue by telegraphing the punch lines in advance" (2004: 21). I agree with Donohue's emphasis on continuity rather than a radical change in "the basic style of enactment," but I still think Gilbert's advice marks a shift toward realist acting—or, rather, a mode of comedic acting that shares

realist acting's greater emphasis on de-theatricalization and underplaying. Carolyn Williams understands "the deadpan Gilbertian acting style as a generalized parody of high Victorian 'natural acting,'" the more subdued style of performance advocated by T.W. Robertson in his mid-century cup-and-saucer dramas (2011: 7). Gilbert does not instruct the actors to feel their characters' feelings, but to appear to feel them: to play the parts earnestly and gravely. English deadpan, then, emerged as a parodic earnestness that did not radically break from existing styles of performance so much as it developed and formalized them in order to produce the sort of impression Fitzgerald came to call a "double intention."

From Gilbert's instruction to his actors we can draw a direct line to two recorded instances in which Oscar Wilde advised actors on the delivery of his lines. Wilde wrote in his rehearsal script of *A Woman of No Importance* that the actor Beerbohm Tree was "too theatrical" in the role of Lord Illingworth, the suave dandy (Pearson 1956: 68). Wilde told Tree that in order to play Lord



FIGURE 2.6: Irene Vanbrugh as Gwendolyn Fairfax in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895. Photo by Hulton Archive / Stringer / Getty Images.

Illingworth, Tree would have to “forget” that he had played Hamlet, Falstaff, and “a Duke in a melodrama by Henry Arthur Jones” (Pearson 1956: 65). Wilde likewise told actors in the St. James’s production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which was heavily influenced by Gilbert’s *Engaged*, to play their parts “as naturally as possible” (Cave in Bennett 2015: 139). Irene Vanbrugh, who played Gwendolyn Fairfax, struggled with Wilde’s instruction until she tried thinking the lines before she said them: in her autobiography she writes, “I rejoiced in the sparkling wit when I had learnt to speak it as though coming from myself” (Cave in Bennett 2015: 139). Richard Allen Cave suggests that another term for Vanbrugh’s mode of acting is earnestness (2015: 140). But, perhaps in contrast to Gilbert’s actors’ brand of earnest playing, Vanbrugh’s description of thinking the lines before she said them suggests something akin to the “inside-out” approach conventionally associated with twentieth-century American realist acting. Variation in what constitutes realist acting is itself routine, and Gilbert’s and Wilde’s advice to actors shows their investment in developing underplayed modes of comedic acting to deliver the late nineteenth century’s new comic genres and characters.

In his second to last play, *An Ideal Husband*, Wilde makes deadpan an aspect of character by explicitly scripting impassivity and expressionlessness into his stage directions. The best example is in Wilde’s description of Phipps the butler, the play’s funniest character, who is not introduced until Act 3: “*The distinction of Phipps is his impassivity. He has been termed by enthusiasts the Ideal Butler. The Sphinx is not so incommunicable. He is a mask with a manner. Of his intellectual or emotional life, history knows nothing. He represents the dominance of form*” (2016: 84). Andrew Goldstone argues that this stage direction

suggests two competing explanations for the form-upholding inaccessibility of the butler’s “intellectual or emotional life”: “impassivity” is part of the butler’s duty, his status as human furniture, but Wilde’s wit also registers the deliberate artifice that has made the butler into a comic type, “the Ideal Butler.” The thrust of the joke, therefore, is that the exigencies of dramatic composition coincide with the demands imposed by social hierarchy.

—2010: 615

Understood in this way, Phipps could be said to personify as well as complicate Henri Bergson’s understanding of the comic, which is that people become funny when they resemble inanimate objects; the comic involves “something mechanical encrusted upon the living” (2003: 49). Phipps personifies this idea with his impassivity and complicates it with the idea that there might be nothing under the mask, or rather, that the mask *is* the character. Actors’ choices in this role—tone of voice, a raised eyebrow—can swing it in either direction, preserving a sense of impenetrable surface or suggesting that Phipps has his

own opinions about his social betters. Bergson extends the idea that the comic involves something mechanical encrusted on the living to the social world when he argues that because “we are both in and of [society], we cannot help treating it as a living being. Any image, then, suggestive of the notion of a society disguising itself, or of a social masquerade, so to speak, will be laughable” (2003: 28). Wilde’s social masquerade in *An Ideal Husband* explicitly links mechanistic facial expression to good breeding. The play’s other deadpan character is Lord Goring, whom Wilde calls a “*flawless dandy*” with “*A well-bred, expressionless face*” (2016: 18). The impassivity that in Phipps constitutes paid work is in Lord Goring an expressionlessness that has become part of the human face. *An Ideal Husband* is also the play in which Wilde’s stage directions introduce each character by comparing them to art objects. As such, I suggest that it is the play in which Wilde theorizes the deadpan acting he inherited from Gilbert and cultivated in his own actors.

Deadpan’s emergence as parodic Victorian earnestness in Wilde’s plays shows its simultaneous queerness and reliance on a socially central concept and style. Kerry Powell has argued convincingly that “by the mid-1890s . . . there was already a precedent for doubling the terms ‘Earnest’ and ‘Ernest’ into a coded allusion to same-sex passion” (Powell 2009: 111). Powell bases his claim partly on an 1892 collection of homoerotic poetry called *Love in Earnest*, which Wilde and his lover Lord Alfred Douglas probably read. This queer use of earnestness is subversive, but there is also a sincerity to the way the collection’s title yokes same-sex love to the work of Victorian moral seriousness, and to the ideals of an age in its twilight. In 1900, Bergson argues that comedy is the most generalized genre. Comedy, he writes, “lies midway between art and life. It is not disinterested as genuine art is. By organising laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural environment” (Bergson 2003: 80). Comedy, for Bergson, is normative in its acceptance of social life. This normativity is tied to its mimetic qualities: both Bergson and Fitzgerald see comedy as more mimetic than realism, since comedy won’t be funny without exact imitations of human behavior. But I would argue that the history of deadpan helps us approach comedy without falling back on a dichotomizing sense of the normative versus the subversive. One way to do this, which I have tried to model in my discussion of English deadpan, is to consider its imbrication with socially central varieties of work, including earnestness, natural acting, domestic labor, and good breeding.

Another way forward is through gesture, which mid-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English acting guides repeatedly depicted as a uniquely expressive, universal language (Raub 2012: 445). Bergson argues that comedy in particular concentrates our attention on gestures, whereas drama focuses on actions. By actions Bergson means intentional calculations such as a miser who “orders his whole life with a view to acquiring wealth”; in contrast, “gestures” are “the attitudes, the movements and even the language by which a mental

state expresses itself outwardly without any aim or profit, from no other cause than a kind of inner itching” (2003: 68–9). As a performance style deadpan is intentional, though lack of intention is often the state being performed. If by concentrating our attention on gesture, comedy concentrates our attention on the ways mental states express themselves, one way to understand deadpan is as upending—but still invoking—gestural conventions that were both codified and continually under revision (see Downer 1946: 574–5; Meisel 1983: 5). We might say, then, that deadpan is a stylistic register of modern Western theater, which Matthew Wilson Smith frames as beginning “with the breakdown of gesture as a reliable medium for the communication of inner life” (2017: 19).

In the 2017 special issue of the journal *Critical Inquiry* on comedy, Berlant rejects the structuralism of earlier comedy theory from Sigmund Freud to Simon Critchley that assumes comedy’s significance lies in “who is up and who is down; what’s repressed and expressed; known and disavowed; hidden and surprising; free and unfree” (2017: 313). This tendency suggests that comedy theory itself has inherited and must refuse melodrama’s Manichean logic and expressive imperative. Deadpan, in which apparent normalcy is part of the performance, can help us with this problem because it complicates the idea that comedy is normative without asserting its radicalism. Rather, deadpan helps us see the serious work of maintaining norms, and therefore their plasticity. I suggest that tracing the emergence of a low-key style that emerged as melodrama began to recede can test and generate new theories of comedy grounded in histories of genre, culture, and performance.

CHAPTER THREE

Praxis

A Comedy Revolution

MILENA KOZIĆ

There will be fun.

—from a Whit-Monday notice for Albert Palace, London.

Given the torrent of sociocultural change that swept the Continent and Great Britain between 1800 to 1920, it is no exaggeration to say that it was an age of revolution. In addition to political revolutions in France and Russia, the period was shaped by two industrial revolutions (1760–1840 and 1870–1914), by a scientific revolution, and by a middle-class leisure revolution (Lowerson and Myerscough 1977: 1). To this list, we should add a comedy revolution. In nineteenth-century Europe and North America, and particularly in Great Britain, comedy was commodified as mass culture; laughter was sold in popular new forms; middle- and working-class consumers were tempted by the abundance and variety of comic “goods.” Amusement was promised and delivered. Demand never waned. In fact, as the century advanced, it only grew. In this chapter, we examine some of the period’s most popular comic commodities, on stage and, later, on screen. We also explore how new comic media functioned as sites of simultaneous ideological indoctrination and resistance. The business of comedy in the nineteenth century is highly normative *and* anti-elitist; popular culture upholds popular values, but, at the same time, gives vent to popular discontent.

First, we consider pantomime—in particular the clown comedy in the harlequinade—as an unabashed celebration of the materiality of the modern

world. A form of mass entertainment that attracted diverse audiences, pantomimes produced some of the first celebrities in the modern world and even some tribute acts. Their wares included predictable stock characters and plots, as well as spectacle, experimentation, and genre fluidity. Next, we turn to another comic entertainment with mass appeal, music hall, the origin of which can be traced to taverns and public-house song-and-supper rooms, where various acts were performed—including singing (and sing-alongs), dancing, and comedy—in an intimate, informal setting. Due to its immense popularity with the working classes, music hall expanded into a regulated and lucrative industry, creatively negotiating class, gender, and national identity while relying on comedic ambiguity to navigate the dictates of respectability. Continuing this theme of a lively blending of comedy with music, we shift attention to English comic opera and burlesque. As parodies of existing genres, burlesques required a different cultural competence than did pantomimes and music hall. Behind their play with dichotomies like real/fantastical, or domestic/exotic, or lowbrow/highbrow, was a bid for cultural authenticity and a desire to provide social commentary. Of the two, burlesques were generally the more transgressive, hence the less respectable. Finally, the early twentieth century marks the stunning transition from colorful, live stage comedies to black-and-white screen comedy. While the medium of film, and thus its relationship with its audience, was disembodied, it was also continuous in some ways with its predecessor media. Like that of music hall, the humor in screen comedy flirted with violating norms and was equally invested in commenting on the fast-paced world.

The Industrial Revolution ushered in a dramatic shift from hand to machine production, as well as the use of steam power and advances in iron production, which in turn precipitated the proliferation of factories, improvements in transportation and communications systems, an unprecedented rise in productivity and mobility, growth in population, and increased urbanization. Gas lighting, for example, is just one development that made navigating the urban landscape at night easier. Gas was used on London streets from about 1807 and in its theaters from 1817, becoming widespread by mid-century. Not only was it economical and convenient (if hot and smelly), but it led to greater visibility of the stage, performers, and audiences, resulting in more naturalistic performances and easier manipulation of audience attention.

While inventions came out in rapid succession, creating a dizzying atmosphere of affluence and progress for the middle classes, improvements in the standard of living for ordinary people took much longer, with necessities like decent housing, drinking water, and sanitation remaining outside the reach of many. Safety inspections in theaters like the old Garrick and the Prince of Wales's repeatedly warned about defective drains, unsanitary restrooms, and offensive smells, but, due to class prejudice, repairs were deemed necessary only in those

theaters that were attended by primarily working-class audiences (Davis 2000: 108–9). At the other end of the olfactory spectrum, smells were sometimes employed deliberately, as when pantomimes and extravaganzas sprayed perfume into the air (Corbin 1986: 198), whether for a specific effect or to “please and excite” the audience and immerse them in the event (Classen et al. 1994: 26–7).

THE FRANTIC MATERIALITY OF THE VICTORIAN CLOWN’S WORLD

Comedy is inherently material and physical. Typically, it requires us to use our senses of sight and hearing, and, if successful, it literally moves us, shaking our body with spasms of laughter. The action that causes this response may be performed by a body in space, rendered by letters or images on a page or screen, or by a live or recorded voice, reaching across varying distances, spatial and temporal, pulling us into its illusion. In Victorian comedy, materiality was of particular importance—after all, this was the age of the machine, of mass production of goods, of a consumerist and acquisitive ethos that structured a world increasingly capitalist, commodified, and overcrowded. The materiality of comedy was two-fold: first, central to these live stage encounters (and later silent-screen ones) was a performing *body* or ensemble of bodies, affording physical comedy pride of place; and second, the materiality of the age was reflected in the comic prominence given to *things*, and to humor’s great dichotomy between the animate and inanimate.

Let us begin with a look at materiality in clowning. Clowns could be seen performing comic acrobatic or equestrian acts in traveling circuses, as well as in permanent, purpose-built venues, like Astley’s Amphitheatre or the Royal Circus. They were included in modest as well as monumental productions, playing a central or *entr’acte* role, or as filler between acts by equestrians, acrobats, tightrope walkers, musicians, or dancing animals. However, their primary realm in this period was the distinctive genre of pantomime. With provenance in Italian *commedia dell’arte*, pantomime relied heavily on physicality (e.g., slapstick, chase scenes, transformation scenes, oversized head masks, elaborate scenery), as well as on stock characters and plots (with an interweaving of classical, folk, and fairy tales with contemporary stories). In England, pantomime’s extended comic chase scene set to music, called the harlequinade, rose and fell from prominence during the long century. Its basic plot involved the elderly Pantaloon, aided by his servant, Clown, trying to keep apart two young lovers (Harlequin and Columbine). Although the focus was traditionally on Harlequin, the immense popularity of Joseph Grimaldi as Clown in the early 1800s shifted the balance in the latter character’s favor. Later in the century, spectacle and fairy-tale openings shaped pantomime. Other characters included the “drag,” (often) matronly Dame, the *travesti*

Principal Boy, and Fairies. Action could be sped up or redirected at the touch of the slapstick, imbued with magical transformative powers, transporting the characters—and audience—from a familiar London street to a mythical location in seconds. Until the 1843 Theatres Act, which legalized dialogue on stage in theaters that did not hold the royal patent, there was limited speech in pantomimes (an opening “Here we are again,” or “Nice” while eating, and spoken nonsense during songs). After 1843, verbal humor thrived alongside song and physical comedy, allowing more ample word-play, and gradually helping make the Clown redundant.

A Regency pioneer of physical comedy, Grimaldi transfixed audiences with his thrilling chases and pratfalls, even more imaginative than acrobatic; his relentless, expansive violence; his excessive, superhuman consumption; and the innovative appearance of his character. His comedy was a mix of exuberance and subtlety, a physical eloquence that rendered speech unnecessary, because “every limb of him had a language” (“Some Recollections of Grimaldi” 1837: 383). One of Grimaldi’s first routines, in *Peter Wilkins, or Harlequin and the Flying World* (Dibdin 1800), took the form of a grotesque competition between Guzzle the Drinking Clown and Gobble the Eating Clown, in “a parody of Georgian greed” (Findlater 1978: 158). The motif of excess continued in *Harlequin and Fortunio; or, Shing-Too and Thun-Ton*, where his gluttonous character Munchicow, “a very gifted Eater and Drinker,” must “eat all the bread of the city, and drink all the water of the Fountain of Seven Lions” to save the kingdom (Anon. 1815: 3–5).

Grimaldi’s comic violence against women, children, and the elderly enacted brutality, but was crucially fictional and therefore amounted to “clown-atrocity, the crimes that delight us” (“Some Recollections of Grimaldi” 1837: 375). The stage merely simulates, thus real injury is not possible, so “there is no crime, and no punishment” (Findlater 1978: 118). Clown violence, then, is a celebration of freedom and indestructibility. Because the Clown amuses visually first, appearance and action are paramount. On hearing minstrels perform, Grimaldi immediately joins in on his makeshift instruments like kettle, ladle, and whisk; alternatively, he elaborates on a dance by turning it into a whirlwind of theft and unprovoked violence. His repertoire includes physical comedy (pratfalls, leaps, mock fights, swordfights, mock decapitations, mock flattenings), acrobatics (contortion, animal impersonations performed by children actors or contortionists, somersaults through windows or other obstacles, and changing clothes mid-air), making full use of various props (the slapstick with added gunpowder, stilts, barrels, springboards, red-hot pokers, and butter in the path of pursuers to cause falls), and the structure of the stage itself (trapdoors, illusions in the scenery, transformation of various objects). Experimenting with the individuating and transformative potential of clothes, he uses them strategically in his bodily dialogue with the material world. His extravagant,

brightly colored costume, striking make-up and blue-crested wig marked the transition from clown as a rustic menial or servant to a new, unruly figure reminiscent of the court jester.

Speech was secondary to nonverbal communication in Grimaldi's comedy, yet we find visual and verbal humor working in concert, as when Clown reads from a stolen letter and, holding the noose that was enclosed, says: "Sir, I'll just trouble you with a line." Things in general are a friend to humor, and Grimaldi's comedy, like that of later Victorian clowns, abounds with them, in the form of props, plot accelerators, and visual punchlines, underscoring the animate/inanimate dichotomy. Carrots and turnips transform into an animated vegetable-man; conversely, a long stick, wheel of cheese, and Pantaloon's body assemble into a wheelbarrow. In a sketch called "The New American Anticipating Machine," a mechanical apparatus turns a dog into a string of sausages which wag when the owner whistles for the dog.

The "affect machine" (Ridout 2006: 168) of the stage reflected the age of industrialization and mechanization by using mechanical and hydraulic contraptions, systems of pulleys and trapdoors, automata, illusions and props, whose intended effect was to make a production seem "modern," but also larger than life. Many stage and set devices were designed by the comedians themselves, from Grimaldi to the Hanlon-Lees to Buster Keaton. Nineteenth-century clowns, focused so intently on the human/nonhuman dialectic, seized on new technologies, the locomotive in particular, as powerful symbols of the period's relentless hurtling ahead. With their fascination with material objects and knockabout, pantomime routines were later adapted for the screen by vaudeville and silent-film comedians, including Keaton, Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon, and the Marx Brothers. The use of trap doors, for example, a staple of live clowning, features extensively in Keaton's *The High Sign* (1921), while his three-high human pyramid in *Neighbors* (1920) and ladder transformed into a see-saw in *Cops* (1922) were foreshadowed by the Byrne Brothers' *Eight Bells* (1893).

NEGOTIATING DRESS ON THE MUSIC-HALL STAGE

Music hall's origins, in the first half of the nineteenth century, were humble: taverns (such as The Eagle in London's East End) and song-and-supper rooms where patrons were entertained while they ate and drank. Within a couple of decades, music hall had grown into a form of mass entertainment, with venues able to accommodate up to 1,500 people (rising to 5,000 by 1865). The first purpose-built venue was The Canterbury Hall in Lambeth (1852), seating 700, serving food and drink, and offering entertainment on a raised platform at one end of the hall. By the end of the century, over 300 music halls in London alone entertained diverse audiences with a full-evening's mixed bill (singing, dancing,

comedy, drag acts, upper-class parodies by *lions comiques*, feats of strength and agility, animal acts, *tableaux vivants*, conjurors, puppetry, ventriloquists, and other specialty acts). Although this technically violated their license, they also regularly staged selections from operatic works, pantomimes, and ballets.

In music hall, the importance of acrobatics and props varied depending on the performers' focus, but their costume was just as deliberate as that of clowns. The most famous act of music-hall star Little Tich, "The Big Boot Dance,"

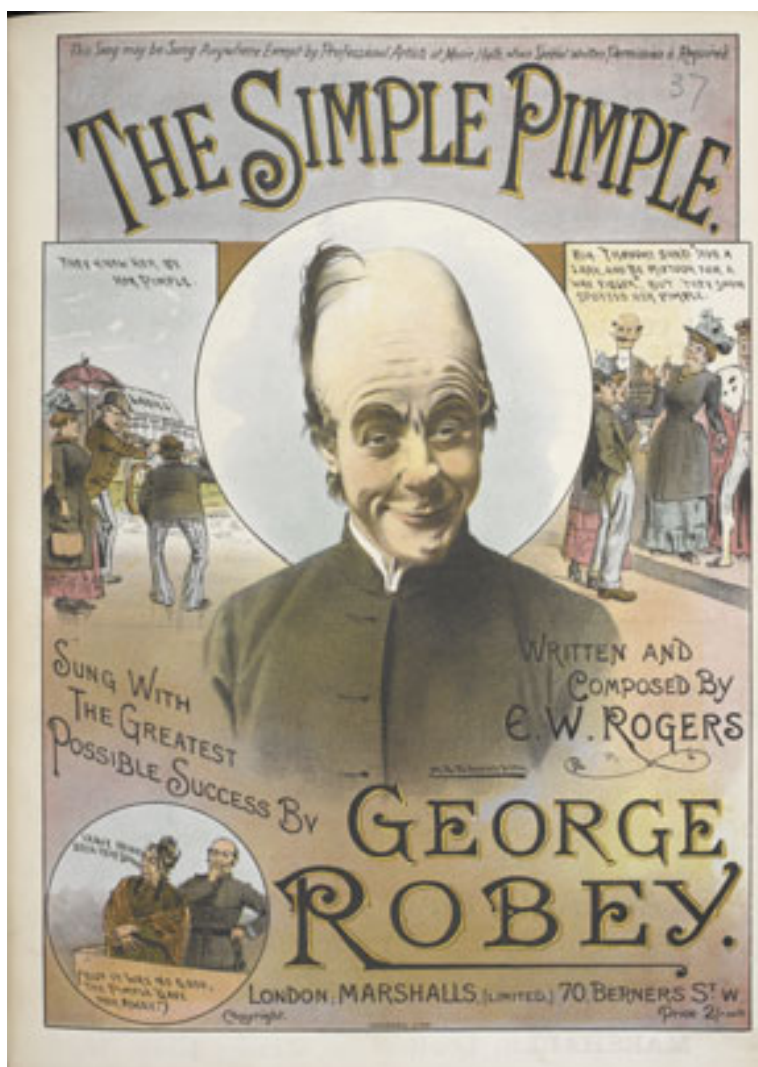


FIGURE 3.1: Advertisement for "The Simple Pimple" starring George Robey, 1891. British Library / Bridgeman Images.

relied on his hat, cane, and signature boots with 28-inch soles. George Robey's trademark was a black coat with a white vicar's collar, a bald wig, red nose, and bold, arched eyebrows, his appearance creating a juxtaposition with his greatest hit, "The Simple Pimple" (1891). Women's costumes varied widely, and occasionally caused controversy. Take the case of popular performer Marie Lloyd, whose titillating dress for "When I Take My Morning Promenade" was deemed "exactly as much too high as it is too low" (Greenwood 1868: 486–91), and whose "rational dress" (knickers and knee socks) for her bicycle song shocked East-End audiences ("East and West with Marie Lloyd" 1895: 452). Indeed, "When I Take My Morning Promenade" is a comment on the history—and volatility—of fashion, and on the strong feelings it can induce:

As I take my morning promenade,
Quite a fashion card, on the promenade;
Now I don't mind nice boys staring hard
If it satisfies their desire.
Do you think that my dress is a little bit,
Just a little bit—not too much of it?
If it shows my shape just a little bit,
That's the little bit the boys admire.

—Mills and Scott 1910

The text allows the performer to present as more or less transgressive, as relatively tame or "fast," depending on her audience. In "a resignification of everyday language" (Bailey 1994: 158), she invites her audience to decode hidden meanings. The "eloquence in what is left unsaid" provided a space for audience laughter, but also for their cultural competence to make the correct inferences (Bailey 1994: 159). This affords agency to the protagonist/performer as well as to her admirers: a counterpoint to the increased control to which music halls were subjected, as they became more popular, in the second half of the century (when performance materials were vetted, and audience-performer interaction discouraged).

The comedic interplay of realism and fantasy was in constant flux. Cross-dressing was popular across comedic praxes: Grimaldi as the Baron's wife in *Harlequin and Cinderella; or, The Little Glass Slipper* (1820); the fantastical working-class Pantomime Dames invented by Dan Leno and Herbert Campbell; Vesta Tilley's tailored men's suits; the ubiquitous "breeches roles" for women in burlesques. Comedy in general welcomes exuberance and overflow, but in some cases, such as rendering a costermonger for a working-class audience, the humor was better received if it was delivered in a toned-down costume. Thus, Jenny Hill's carefully researched outfit for her character in *The Coffee Shop Gal* was an expression of affiliation and empathy. Conversely, her exaggerated,

unfeminine caricature of women's rights campaigner Miss Grym, in *Bother the Men!* (1870), distanced her from her character's pronouncements, her costume being integral not only to her satire but to her negotiation of gender and class identity.

OBEDIENCE AND SUBVERSION IN THE SAVOY OPERAS AND LATE-VICTORIAN CLOWNING

Like pantomime and burlesque, comic opera thrived on lavish, elaborate, and "corroborative" costumes and sets. A distinctive genre of musical theater based on social satire and parodies of existing genres, comic opera was indebted to earlier ballad opera. In England, light opera became synonymous with the work of librettist W.S. Gilbert and composer Arthur Sullivan, simultaneously celebrating and poking fun at Victorian society and institutions, in an "auto-ethnographic" lampooning of class, gender, and national dynamics (Williams 2017: 91). Marketed to the middle classes, comic operas were careful to distinguish themselves from burlesques, avoiding obscenity and cross-dressing. Their realistic, exotic, or fantastical settings reflected the theatrical and topsy-turvy nature of everyday life (Williams 2017: 93). For *The Mikado; or, The Town of Titipu* (1885), Gilbert brought in Japanese consultants for verisimilitude of body language, fan work, and gesture. Authenticity in staging a distant culture had the effect of defamiliarizing British culture, providing audiences with critical distance from themselves, for Gilbert's stage realism inspired debates about whether the English or the Japanese were the true butt of his jokes. The program for the opera emphasized the fact that costumes were made from Japanese fabrics; Gilbert's focus on authenticating detail led one of the stars to request that her obi be twice the size of those of the other two maids.

Comedic manipulation of costume was accompanied by experimentation with staging and design. In Great Britain in particular, unprecedented economic growth fueled by global trade and industrialization made possible the shift in stage technology from paper moons and painted house walls to expensive, larger-than-life sets. Domesticity was fetishized, down to the most minute detail, with intricately designed interiors built for different productions, and fashionable clothes made to measure for the cast. To the initial shock of audiences, real tea and dessert were prepared on stage. Some productions (in particular spectacles but also clown acts) introduced horses onto the stage, as well as rail tracks, trains, tunnels, bridges, boats, and live fish in tanks for underwater scenes. In the pantomime *Le Voyage en Suisse (A Trip to Switzerland)*, for example, the clown family Hanlon-Lees offered audiences, first in Paris (1879), and later in London (1880) and New York (1881), the usual fare of clowning, acrobatics, and juggling on elaborate sets, as well as creative scenographic solutions to the challenge of staging the show. The plot of *Le*



FIGURE 3.2: Cover of Score of *Airs from The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan, 1885. Photo by Hulton Deutsch / Getty Images.

Voyage en Suisse is a reworking of traditional pantomime plots, with young lovers forcibly separated by an old lecher who then takes the girl to Switzerland. The young man follows with his servants, and chaos ensues. The pantomime was ostensibly a vehicle for the Hanlons' acrobatics, but, on a technical level, it delivered groundbreaking spectacle, including an exploding train, a collapsing stagecoach, the demolition of train cars, and the cross-section of a Pullman sleeping car, complete with rotating wheels to simulate the train going at full



FIGURE 3.3: Advertisement for the Hanlon-Lees' *Le Voyage en Suisse*, c. 1880. Library of Congress.

speed. Originally written in French, the pantomime was adapted, first for British, then American, audiences. Tellingly, in the French version, the consummation of a marriage is prevented, while in the English version a middle-aged suitor is prevented merely from broaching the subject of marriage. This decision to let concerns for propriety override the interests of comedy was described by one reviewer as “quelling any little irregularity which, however acceptable, even to highly moral English when over in the gay capital of France, could not for a moment be tolerated in the happy island of their birth” (“What the Leading Papers of London Say” 1880: 21).

That said, on the Victorian stage, middle-class propriety was often satirized even as it was upheld. We see this in Gilbert and Sullivan’s one-act comic opera *Trial by Jury* (1875), which centers around a lawsuit for breach of promise of marriage, a common legal practice at the time, the effect of which was to commodify romantic love and put a monetary value on reputation and heartbreak. The opera pokes fun at Victorian law, gender conflict, male solidarity, and hypocrisy hiding behind respectability (when, for instance, the all-male jurors, barrister, and judge recognize their own misdeeds in those of the Defendant, Edwin, yet keep this to themselves and attack him all the more).

In his defense, Edwin claims he would not have made a good husband to the Plaintiff anyway, for:

I smoke like a furnace—
 I'm always in liquor,
 A ruffian—a bully—a sot;
 I'm sure I should thrash her,
 Perhaps I should kick her,
 I am such a very bad lot!
 I'm not prepossessing,
 As you may be guessing;
 She couldn't endure me a day.
 Recall my professing,
 When you are assessing
 The damages Edwin must pay!

—Gilbert and Sullivan 1875: lines 350–7

The main humorous incongruity here is a Defendant in court earnestly presenting evidence against himself as evidence in his favor. In exposing the performances of those involved as just that, performances, *Trial by Jury* highlights the theatricality and moral relativism of contemporary society and the fluid nature of identity. In a similar vein, in *The Mikado*, another legal-juridical nightmare, the impending execution of Ko-Ko, is made lighter through the verbal mechanism of alliteration, as well as the break-neck speed at which the performers are required to sing:

To sit in solemn silence in a dull, dark, dock,
 In a pestilential prison, with a life-long lock,
 Awaiting the sensation of a short, sharp, shock,
 From a cheap and chippy chopper on a big black block!

—1885: lines 605–8

LEISURE AND RESPECTABILITY

Nineteenth-century British stage comedy had a vexed relationship to the dominant ideology of the age, that of middle-class respectability. A combination of “moral rectitude . . . [and] . . . economic continence and self-sufficiency” (Bailey 1998: 33), respectability structured middle-class identity and was touted as a model for the working-class population. Under constant surveillance, comedic theater, in particular that which catered to working-class audiences, excited very different responses from middle-class critics. Where T. S. Eliot saw in music-hall stars like Marie Lloyd a unique “capacity for expressing the soul

of the people,” making their audiences “not so much hilarious as happy” (1922: 659–63), others saw in these performers—especially in the figure of the female serio-comic—immorality and lewdness (Greenwood 1868: 486–91). Periodically, the halls were investigated by the authorities and forced to feign decency to avoid legal trouble.

Much of the content in music-hall performances, and in burlesques especially, relied for its comic effect on toying with the boundaries of the appropriate. Additionally, it was usually the performance itself, rather than the script *per se*, that cast a “blue” light on the song. Examples abound. The greeting in Bessie Bellwood’s “What Cheer, ‘Ria” was pronounced so as to sound like “watch your rear”; Lottie Collins’s 1891 “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay” was accompanied by her suggestive high-kicking dance; Marie Lloyd reveled in delivering one version of “I sits among the cabbages and peas” for her working-class audience, which included gesticular stage “business” that rendered unambiguous her meaning, and then a “straight” version when she was called before a Theatres and Music Halls Committee in 1896. In most cases, no action was taken against the performers, in part because it was difficult to prove indecency without concrete evidence, but also because moralistic accusers were hesitant to repeat the offending gestures in court.

As the century advanced, conservative and evangelical Protestant organizations began to campaign for purity, temperance, and utilitarian notions of propriety, lobbying the British government to combat what they called “impure leisure,” including alcohol abuse and prostitution (Davis 1991: 40). Coterminous with Victorian debates about health, hygiene, and the meaning of civilization, these anti-obscenity campaigns were not just religiously and politically motivated; they were inextricably linked to the economic interests of industrialists, who required alert, productive workers to maximize profits. The working and under classes were paradoxically seen as needing paternalistic guidance and as being responsible for their lack of success in life. Although repressive in nature, the campaigns reflected some legitimate concerns, like women’s safety, sex trafficking, and domestic abuse. In the 1890s, social reformer Laura Ormiston Chant waged a battle for “social purity” in London’s music halls, which she perceived as under assault from within by indecency, both on stage and in the auditorium. She implored the Theatre and Music Halls Committee to “vigilantly watch our entertainments, and vigorously repress whatever is clearly contrary to good morals” (*The Vigilance Record*, April 1889).

DAN LENO’S OBSERVATIONAL COMEDY

Despite the best efforts of the warriors for respectability, the spirit of frivolity persevered in stage comedies, which borrowed from a wide array of source material: fairy tales, folktales, fables, classical stories, myths, as well as the minor

and major events of quotidian life, especially its uncomfortable or bizarre aspects. Some comedians gained loyal followings precisely because of the more realistic or unfiltered elements in their acts. Music-hall and pantomime star Dan Leno, for example, developed an observational style of comedy that focused on the underdog, entertaining his audiences with song, dance, and comical monologues punctuated by physical comedy. He took the audience “into his confidence,”



FIGURE 3.4: Pantomime artist Dan Leno, *c.* 1896. Photo by Hulton Archive / Stringer / Getty Images.

establishing intimacy, “revealing the most squalid secrets of the slums,” in the words of Edward Lucas, with “the resultant effect of light and happiness, laughter irresistible, and yet never for a moment cruel, never at anything, but always with it” (1918: 62–4). A pioneer in the art of “patter,” which Michael Childs defines as a “changing mélange of jokes and topical allusions interposed between verses . . . [where] social content appeared most markedly” (1992: 123), Leno recounts an explosion at home that sends his parents through the roof: “‘I shall always remember it,’ he said gravely, while his face lit with triumph and satisfaction, ‘because it was the only time that father and mother ever went out together’” (quoted in Lucas 1918: 62–4). A precursor to stand-up, patter was an important element of music-hall turns; it was punctuated with music and blended with song and dance to create a distinctive comic rhythm. “The Doctor” (1893) stands out among Leno’s many attempts to spoof authority:

If my medicine’s weak, my fees are strong, so that makes up for it . . . Though I say it myself, I may not have cured many, but I’ve killed thousands . . . Oh! I never let a patient go once I get him. I’ve one old gentleman I’ve been attending for years. He’ll never get any better (not so long as I attend him), and he has no idea what’s the matter with him (and I’m certain I haven’t). But he’s very nervous so I generally walk behind him and drop my stick. See the idea? That jars his nerves (one pound eight, bottle of Nerve Mixture, three and three . . .).

Leno courts comic incongruity by undermining expectations at every turn with his topsy-turvy logic: shamelessness is proudly advertised; threats against patients supplant cures; incompetence is lauded as a trick of the trade. Leno satirized authority figures and respectable masculinity, in particular domestic types, and, in the passage that follows, he adopts the persona of a desperate husband who finally gets respite from his nagging wife when she departs for the seaside to recuperate:

Well, when we got to the platform, I felt so overjoyed I could have cuddled the engine. I asked the guard what time the train went, he said, “In five minutes.” I said, “Send it off in three, and there’s a pot of four-half for you.” He said “Shall I lock the lady in?” I said, “Nail her in! hammer her in!” And when the train left the station, I turned round and kissed all the porters; and I had two cabs home and ran between them, and I’ve invited the two dressmakers from next door to come and have a cup of tea and bring a bit of sewing; and I’m going to sit on the table, take my boots off, put my feet on the mantel-piece, spit on the ceiling, and throw all the cups and saucers out of the window.

—“The Grass Widower, or, She’s Going out of Town” 1891

The bare-all confession creates rapport with the audience, a “communal circuitry” (Faulk 2004: 30) of affect—they are Leno’s confidants, and he is at their mercy. Leno mocks the unnatural nature of middle-class joy by extending it to inanimate objects (the engine “cuddled” for its role in removing the wife); he pokes fun at bourgeois precision (even two minutes less would mean so much!); he satirizes middle-class masculinity in the brief game of rhetorical one-upmanship between husband and guard (from *lock* to *nail* to *hammer*). His wife’s long-awaited departure results in comical self-assertion, extravagant and wasteful consumption, and indulgence in a few (presumably forbidden) activities.

THE POLITICS OF THE HALLS

Domestic themes were ubiquitous in music hall. While most comic-song lyricists and composers were middle class, they wrote with working-class audiences and with what they perceived to be working-class priorities in mind: the stress of rent-day, oppressive mothers-in-law, dying donkeys, adulterated beer or sausage, domestic violence, the threat of foreign labor, and the art of fleeing the premises without paying rent. Crucially, these very real—and, for some members of the audience, life-threatening—problems were rendered comical rather than frightening, laughter deployed cathartically, but, at the same time, in such a way as to deflate the radical impulses that discontent might awaken (Senelick 1975: 151). For Max Beerbohm, music hall was “Demos’ Mirror” ([1900] 1969: 276), but it was also an imperialist propaganda machine helping to control the workers and protect the interests of the empire and ruling classes. The word “jingo” originated in a music-hall hit, “By Jingo” (1878), by Gilbert Hastings MacDermott, The Great MacDermott, a “specialist at selling the British Empire” to the masses (Senelick 1975: 168). That said, music-hall performers, like their audiences, were not a politically or culturally monolithic group: Herbert Campbell’s restrained parodies of militant nationalism were just as popular as MacDermott’s imperialist chest-pounding. For Gareth Stedman Jones, music hall is ultimately conformist and normative, an escapist “culture of consolation” (1974: 499). Peter Bailey, on the other hand, credits music hall with subversion as well as complicity, with nurturing a “culture of competence” based on solidarity, “collusion,” and a shared “knowingness,” which helped audiences navigate increasingly complex cityscapes (Bailey 1994: 150–68). By signaling to the crowd that they are “in the know,” the performer “implicat[es] them in a select conspiracy of meaning,” thereby forging an audience of cultural conspirators (Bailey 1994: 151).

Compared to early broadside ballads, music-hall performances were less political and less obscene. The anti-seditious Licencing Act of 1737 limited spoken drama to two patent theaters in London; saloon theaters, then, were

formally barred, in the early and mid-nineteenth century, from inciting political debate. This history of repression, in conjunction with other factors—audience heterogeneity, the growth of music hall into a full-fledged industry at mid-century, the professionalization of performers (formal contracts, rehearsals, etc.), increased specialization—resulted in “toothless” political songs, many of which were patriotic in nature, supportive of the queen, the empire, and the status quo (Senelick 1975: 149–80). In the first example below, a broadside ballad praising Queen Victoria, Prince Albert is attacked as a traitor due to his German “Otherness” and his perceived weakness in responding to the Russian threat:

Last Monday night, all in a fright,
 Al out of bed did tumble,
 The German lad was raving mad,
 How he did groan and grumble!
 He cried to Vic, “I’ll cut my stick,
 To Petersburg, go right slap,”
 When Vic, ‘tis said, jumped out of bed,
 And whopp’d him with her night cap.
 There, with the bolster round the room,
 Vic gave him dreadful lashes,
 She scratched his face and broke his nose,
 And pulled out his moustaches,
 “You German dog, you shall be flogg’d,”
 She halloed like a Prussian,
 “How could you dare to interfere
 And turn a cursed Russian?”

—“Lovely Albert” 1855: lines 29–44

Unlike broadside ballads, music-hall political songs tend to focus their satirical energy on personal traits or foibles of targeted politicians, and not on their politics *per se*. Thus, Randolph Churchill was ridiculed for his safari trips; John Bright for his Quakerism; Charles Dilke for his involvement in a high-profile divorce. Policies were satirized, but only when they were perceived as anti-imperial, or not jingoistic enough; personal scandal, however, was relished. Charles Parnell, leader of the Irish Home Rule League, was ridiculed in the following manner for his relationship with a woman separated from her husband:

Charly Parnell, Charly Parnell,
 Oh you “notty” boy!
 Why did you interfere with another’s joy? . . .

You want Home Rule for Ireland,
And you can't Home Rule yourself!

—quoted in Booth 1933: 141

This was complemented by MacDermott's patter and chorus in "The Fire Escape" (1890):

Heavens! What a situation!
Hardly time to put on one's gloves!
No chance to avoid detection,
No way to save the lady's reputation!
Oh yes, thank goodness, there is one!
Happy, thrice happy thought:
The fire escape, the fire escape!
It was indeed a merry jape
When Charlie Parnell's naughty shape
Went scooting down the fire escape!

—quoted in Booth 1933: 141–2

There is rejoicing here at the downfall of Irish authority, at the temporary reversal of moral and social standing, at the exposure of hypocrisy. Sexuality, drinking, and vice in general represented comedic staples, but were inconsistently linked either to pleasure or to social disruption. Alcohol sales were an important source of revenue for the halls, and the reliance on "wet money," or money from liquor sales, was inscribed in their origins. This brought music hall into conflict with temperance groups and strengthened its links to Toryism, which was associated with the lucrative drink trade (Stedman Jones 1974: 495).

THE TRANSGRESSIVE FRIVOLITY OF THE BURLESQUE

Preoccupation with one's standing in the world, alongside shifting and contradictory attitudes toward transgression and respectability, are at the heart of another major form of Victorian live comedy: the burlesque. Burlesque is a comic, frivolous reinterpretation of one or more texts (from mythology, Shakespeare, or opera) or of specific theatrical productions, through a combination of speech, dance, and music (borrowing elements from opera, operatic ballads, folk songs, parlor songs, music-hall songs, and minstrelsy). Outrageous titles telegraphed transgressive intent: *Lucrezia Borgia! At Home and All Abroad* (1860); *King Queer, and His Daughters Three* (1855); *Robert the Devil; or, the Nun, the Dun, and the Son of a Gun* (1868). Early in the century,

burlesque's illegitimate position enabled it to offer audiences irreverent or alternative perspectives on various social, political, and cultural issues, challenging the status quo. Legal impediments to performing spoken drama had the effect of heightening the sensory elements of burlesque performance, rendering its visual and aural components all the more prominent. In the wake of the 1843 Theatre Regulation Act, however, which diminished the role of the Lord Chamberlain and awarded licensing powers to local authorities, burlesque humor grew less satirical and less transgressive. Paradoxically, the greater freedom that came with becoming fully licensed theaters had the effect of legitimizing and thus taming burlesque performance venues, diminishing their potential as sources of radical critique (Tunbridge 2000: 235). Popularity also meant that burlesque performers and writers became more invested in respectability, especially after the 1840s. Take, for example, W.S. Gilbert's relatively innocuous humor in the aforementioned *Robert the Devil* (1868), a burlesque rendition of Giacomo Meyerbeer's opera *Robert le diable* (1831). In Gilbert's burlesque, class stratification is gently spoofed in a list of acceptable and unacceptable holiday destinations, with Margate ridiculed as working class, Boulogne-Sur-Mer presented as appropriately middle class, and Rome reserved for the aristocracy. In the same way that music-hall performers satirized out-of-favor politicians only, and on personal grounds, burlesques maintained a narrow line of attack, lightly criticizing individual government policies rather than the system as a whole or its structural inequalities (Day 2011: 11–12).

Burlesque relies heavily on puns, slang, drag, as well as on topical, intertextual references and on jokes about drinking, fighting, and sexuality. Its major comic mechanism was status reversal (along the low/high axis), translating "high" art into "low," or conversely, elevating something mundane or vulgar to surprising heights. Favorite targets of comic status reversal included literary genres, respected cultural documents, and famous theatrical productions, as well as individual artists' styles, including Charles Kean's *Macbeth*, and, in F.C. Burnand's 1886 *Faust and Loose*, Ellen Terry's performance as Marguerite. In the burlesque *Lancelot the Lovely* (1889), Arthur draws Excalibur from a funfair high striker; in the balcony scene of *Romeo and Juliet Travestie, Or, The Cup of Cold Poison* (1859), Juliet's dog won't stop barking. Burlesque's intertextuality alienated some audiences (those unfamiliar with the source texts and audiences in the provinces, where a recent London reference may not yet have arrived), but physical and visual humor was available to those who missed a reference (Monrós-Gaspar 2015: 12). Compared to most material from the halls and pantomime, the content of burlesques and of English comic operas was more semantically opaque, requiring more sophisticated deciphering and a knowledgeable or culturally *au fait* audience. That said, burlesque was still a business; its comic material had to travel well, which meant that it needed to be broad enough and not too topical or obscure.

PERFORMER AND AUDIENCE AGENCY

With the rise of modern spectator culture in the nineteenth century, the stage became the principal site where—to quote Charles Dickens—the “natural inborn desire of the mass of mankind to recreate themselves and to be amused” could be satisfied “by our common laughter and our common tears” (2000a: 60–1). Live performances were exchanges of affect; comedians traded stories, songs, and pratfalls for laughter and applause, as well as for professional and financial recognition. Early in the century, Grimaldi could not leave the house dressed as Clown without being bombarded with requests from passers-by for an impromptu performance. By mid-century, however, most performers were willing participants in their own commodification. After performing in 1866 for the future King Edward VII at Sandringham, where the Prince of Wales was hosting members of the Danish royal family, the conjuror Henry Evans Evanion presented himself in publicity materials as “The Royal Conjuror.” He would do so for the rest of his life. Another royal anecdote concerns Marie Lloyd, who was conspicuously excluded from the program for the first Royal Command Performance in 1912. This snub, variously attributed to her turbulent private life and to her siding with the *artistes* during the Music Hall War of 1907, was all the more offensive to Lloyd because the event was dedicated to the music halls. Lloyd organized a parallel event, spitefully announcing the performance of “Marie Lloyd, Queen of the Halls,” and declaring: “Every performance by Marie Lloyd is a command performance—by command of the British public!” Thus, after being denied respect, she reclaimed it on her own terms: an ability forged through a career spent managing unruly, often intoxicated, crowds.

Performers were not the only ones who demanded respect and attention. In music hall, audiences sang along; during pantomimes, they would address the actors on stage; and in both venues, there was an abundance of heckling. Dissatisfied spectators pelted Dan Leno with pennies toward the end of his career. Audiences shouted requests for—or demanded—certain songs, or expressed displeasure at certain types of dance. The most violent and dramatic exhibition of the will of the audience came in 1809, when the management of the newly rebuilt Covent Garden theater raised admission for the boxes and pit, while the price remained the same for the gallery (which had been redesigned to offer only an obstructed view of the performers’ legs). The audience erupted on the first night, shouting their displeasure, heckling the performers, and, for the next three months, interrupting performances with badges, banners, rattles, trumpets, and whistles, releasing live pigs and pigeons into the auditorium, and parading around in drag. The standoff ended with the manager apologizing and conceding to their demands.

When the young serio-comic Bessie Bellwood was heckled by a man in the audience, she delivered so devastating a comeback that Jerome K. Jerome was



FIGURE 3.5: Pen and ink drawing of Bessie Bellwood on stage, *c.* 1880s. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

compelled to memorialize his experience of it as a story, “Variety Patter” (1892). In Jerome’s version, when the then-unknown Bellwood enters in place of the audience’s favorite performer, she is met with hisses, whistles, and heckles, and suggestions that she can sing the hall chairman to sleep. Unfazed, she singles out the ringleader, and an admirable “slanging match” ensues, at the end of which the man “lay gasping, dazed, and speechless” (Jerome 1892: 133). She “announced her intention of ‘wiping down the bloomin’ ‘all’ with him, and

making it respectable” (1892: 133). She then unleashed, for “five and three-quarter minutes,” without pausing or faltering, a torrent of abuse so cutting and obscene “that strong men,” Jerome writes, “drew and held their breath while it passed over them, and women hid their faces and shivered” (1892: 135).

Jerome does not disclose the specifics of her response, choosing instead to mythologize her powers of eloquence. We are informed only that she berated the heckler, as well as “his people and his gods, . . . his every hope, ambition, and belief,” and that her insults were so incisive that “the last name that she called him one felt to be, until one heard the next, the one name that he ought to have been christened by” (1892: 135). Her only weak moment comes “when she offered to make a better man than he was out of a Guy Fawkes and a lump of coal”—weak only because “you felt that one lump of coal would not have been sufficient” (1892: 135). Bellwood’s eloquence and daring win over the fickle crowd, and she proves herself as both performer and entrepreneur. Such “volatile exchanges across the footlights” (Bailey 1998: 149–50) are reminders that, in the mercurial and unpredictable space that is music hall, performers and audience members alike have agency.

It is important to remember that music hall was a business as much as it was a venue for comedic performance. In the end, the “bottom line” underlies the construction of comedic meaning. The commercialization of leisure and commodification of popular culture that occurred in the nineteenth century correlated with an intrusion into comic praxes by business interests and, to a lesser extent, by local licensing authorities. The music-hall auditorium was reconfigured, for instance, to maximize occupancy (by replacing freestanding tables with fixed stalls and marginalizing the bar) in a process of “control and dilution” (Bailey 1987: 163). Performers were packaged as “products.” The star system emerged, along with business agents for performers, formal contracts, increased wages, advertising, branding, tours, and trade press. Finally, the performances themselves changed, becoming more sophisticated and less extemporaneous, more specialized. To boost productivity and precision, there was a rigorous rehearsal schedule, multiple performances per night, a turns system, and suppression of encores, ad-libbing, and audience interaction. The aforementioned 1907 strike was a reaction against oppressive contracts, pay disagreements, and extra uncompensated performances being added weekly. The intimacy between performers and audience, first built in dialogue, direct address, and immediate feedback, with emphasis on shared knowledge, conviviality, and rapport, was partly undone at the turn of the century, with darkening of the auditorium and restrictions on patter and audience participation. Slowly but surely, the unruly crowds of bygone days—eating, drinking, talking, shouting, singing, flirting, even fighting—were tamed, reduced to seated spectators and passive consumers in a darkened hall (Summerfield 1981: 226). Mass entertainment was now show *business*, and, in

this respect, it was positioned in awkward—if somewhat wistful—opposition to the relatively mischievous ethos of early-nineteenth-century comedy.

SILENT COMEDIES: A NEW DISTANCE, A NEW INTIMACY

The last three decades of the nineteenth century coincided with a second industrial revolution, primarily an expansion of the first, but with a more widespread usage of the innovations introduced at the end of the first, especially the railway. By the end of the century, gas and water supply, as well as sewage systems, were relatively common. It was the age of electrification. Other than electricity, the main additions to industry and to quotidian life included steel and rubber production, engines and turbines, the bicycle and automobile. The telegraph had spread continuously over the course of the century, with the completion in 1866 of a commercial telegraph cable across the Atlantic. In 1876, the telephone was patented, and in the 1890s the radio. Most significant for comedy, around 1877 Eadweard Muybridge created the first “proto-movie,” featuring a horse in gallop. In 1894, the Lumière brothers made the first motion picture. On January 7, 1894, Thomas Edison filmed his assistant, Fred Ott, sneezing.

Coming out of the loud and colorful world of live comedies, late-Victorian audiences must have found the experience of watching “silent,” black-and-white comedies uncanny and disembodied. Almost from the start, however, films were accompanied with live music, usually a piano or organ, so they weren’t exactly silent; alternatively, a pre-recorded score was sometimes superimposed onto the visual text. Here, comedy is choreography, the physical spectacle in sync with the stirring music (e.g., *Neighbors*, 1920), each punctuating and strengthening the effects of the other. What was missing was speech, which meant that, in order for any comic intent to be conveyed, it had to be done visually. Another distinctive feature of early film comedy is its uneven, grainy, and sped-up quality, the result of undercranked camerawork, which had the effect of denaturalizing the body. For the audience, film is even less participatory and communal than the act of facing a live performer in a darkened theater: film is pure spectating. In 1915, a young cinema-goer named Thomas Burke described the disorienting experience of film-watching:

It is the mechanical nature of the affair that so depresses me. It may be clever; I have no doubt it is. But I would rather see the worst music-hall show that was ever put up than the best picture-play that was ever filmed. The darkness, the silence, the buzz of the machine, and the insignificant processions of shadows on a sheet are about the last thing I should ever describe by the word Entertainment.

—Burke 1915: 110–12

The new medium was mechanical and clever; it was certainly innovative. But for this young spectator—emotionally, texturally—it did not *feel* like “Entertainment.”

Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new comic tone emerges in the work of Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, “Fatty” Arbuckle, and Laurel and Hardy. In contrast to the relative geniality and boisterousness of Victorian music-hall comedy, silent comedy is structured by a sense of urban insecurity, irony, cynicism, and existential weariness. In *His Wedding Night* (1917), for instance, Keaton is a milliner’s assistant and Arbuckle, a pharmacist. The comic plot might look familiar, replete with norm violations, but audiences are removed from it. They cannot catch the eye of the performers or experience themselves as bodily complicit. They *spy* knowingly on comedy: on people abusing perfume-sampling privileges; on a vengeful pharmacist replacing perfume with chloroform; on shopkeepers short-changing and overcharging; on “Fatty” kissing an unconscious customer; on Keaton modelling a wedding dress for the bride-to-be. In *The Cure* (1917), Chaplin plays an alcoholic who arrives at a spa town to “take the waters” (which he, of course, can’t take). His large luggage case opens to reveal a generously stocked bar, which eventually ends up in the spring itself, leading to a pan-resort alcohol-fueled frenzy. Chaplin’s early work on London’s stages and continuity with the tradition of the halls is evident here—he was on his second US tour with Fred Karno’s successful company when he decided to stay. Much of the film’s comedy stems from drunken movement, from a sense of disconnection from the world, with characters unsteady on their feet, bumping into each other, falling over, their chaotic bodily behavior threatening epistemological stability itself. A drunken Chaplin mistakes the flirting of an older man, directed at a young woman sitting nearby, as meant for him—and immediately flirts back, flattered, coy, coquettish. There is a rough massage, part of Chaplin’s treatment, which deteriorates into a wrestling match. Finally, a romance kindles between Charlie and the young woman, and he promises to reform, only to fall into the “contaminated” spring at the very next step.

In silent film, comic heroes are presented as oblivious to their environment, to others’ intentions and motivations, even to their own. These twentieth-century clowns might be expressive and tender at times, but their automaton-like relentlessness, rigidity, and inertia recall Henri Bergson’s definition of the comedic as “something mechanical encrusted on the living” (1999: 39). These new clowns are absorbed by the world of machines, as when Chaplin is caught in the revolving door at the spa and spins in circles like a wind-up doll. As in pantomime, distinctions between the animate and inanimate are blurred: a tram-pulling horse is oiled like a machine in *The Bellboy* (1918); a car behaves like a sentient being in *Oh, Doctor!* (1917). Keaton’s Clown is bumbling yet precise, gentle yet affectless. His machinic nature means that audiences need



FIGURE 3.6: Charlie Chaplin (left) and actor Eric Campbell in the 1917 silent film *The Cure*. Photo by Bettmann / Getty Images.

not root for him—the comedy is paramount. We are encouraged to laugh equally at his triumphs as at his failures. Behind the deadpan, however, James Agee detects a “whisper not of pathos but of melancholia” (1949: 85). Keaton began his career when he was three years old, performing alongside his parents as “The Three Keatons” in vaudeville and medicine shows. The titles of the family’s acts speak to his childhood trauma, for his very sobriquet, “buster,” in vaudevillian slang, means pratfall: “Buster Keaton, the Human Mop” (1902); “The Little Boy Who Can’t Be Damaged” (1902). Not only is the child the act, he is “thinged”: his role is to annoy his father into a rage, and then be kicked, slapped, and thrown around. The dehumanization was completed with his parents adding a suitcase handle to the back of his jacket to make him more portable and manipulable. The influence of vaudeville is evident in Keaton’s expressive deadpan and comedic timing, but also in his insistence on performing his stunts himself and in one shot. Although film is a “do-over” medium, if a bit failed, Keaton would remove it altogether, or try to work it into the story.

Like Regency and early-Victorian clowns, screen clowns are obsessed with the materiality of things; they take “an engineer’s approach to building comedy”

(Hildreth 2013: para. 5). There is intimacy between clown and thing, not least because he *is* a thing. In *The Scarecrow* (1920), Keaton shares a single-room dwelling with another man. The roommates' morning routine takes us on a utilitarian tour of their innovative double-duty lifestyle: the gramophone doubles as a gas stove; the bookcase is also the fridge; the tub becomes a settee; and the Murphy bed is now an upright piano. A complex, Rube Goldberg-like system of pulleys hangs over the dining table with salt, pepper, and assorted condiments dangling from the ceiling; bread is passed from one person to the next in a little cart on tracks, controlled by a hand-crank. Such state-of-the-art devices are juxtaposed with pigs, ducks, and cornfields, addressing the tension in America between urban and rural. Doing the dishes reveals that they are affixed to the table top, which, once clean, becomes a decorative wall hanging, bearing these words: "What is Home Without a Mother."

These silent comedies have a comic language all their own: one of motion, speed, bodies, geometrically perfect jokes, and visual storytelling fully consonant with cinematography. Celebrated for being funny "without the help or hindrance of words" (Agee 1949: 70), these purportedly wordless films nevertheless used shots of text, as in the example above, and title cards inserted between scenes to exploit verbal humor. In *Neighbors* (1920), prominent among the wedding gifts is a large book on "How to Box." In *The Bellboy* (1918), a scary stranger with a long beard and long hair appears at the hotel, which advertises itself as offering "third-rate service at first-rate prices." Buster thinks he is the devil; Fatty thinks he's Rasputin, or, as the title card explains: "the one they call the 'mad monkey,'" a play on Rasputin's nickname, "mad monk." A romantic interest for Arbuckle appears, her business card revealing she is "Miss Cutie Cuticle, manicurist." Providing topical commentary on the war, a sign in the dining room advertises "French and German Cooking," with the middle two words crossed out.

At times, silent comedy betrays its indebtedness to the vaudeville and music-hall stage in its attempts to break the fourth wall and address the audience nonverbally. It is a more abstract and disembodied form of address, of course, as no actual encounter between performer and audience occurs. Distance, then, is constitutive of the medium of film. Nevertheless, on the flat screen, in the flicker of black and white, a modern kind of intimacy is sparked. The screen clown wags his finger at us, but conspiratorially, in fun, tongue-in-cheek. He takes us into his confidence, and the communal circuitry is re-established.

UNDER A WATERFALL

What distinguishes nineteenth-century comic practices from those that preceded them is the large-scale nature of their execution and reception, their mass appeal to an ever-expanding population of insatiable consumers. Nineteenth-century comedy borrowed heavily from earlier epochs, tapping the "great

pipeline of horsing and miming which runs back unbroken through the fairs of the Middle Ages at least to ancient Greece” (Agee 1949: 74). But its character was distinctly nineteenth century, shaped by its fashions and trends, its collective fantasies and anxieties, its respectability and tawdriness—indeed, by the loopholes in the social contract for which it endlessly searched. The comedy revolution might be a corollary to the socioeconomic, technological, and political revolutions that have come to define the age—but we still feel its effects today. In the twentieth century, Victorian-Edwardian music hall morphed into cine-variety and variety (which in the UK survives in the *Royal Variety Performance*), and was resurrected in television programs like *The Good Old Days* (BBC, 1953–83). Its legacy can be found in sketch shows and in stand-up comedy. The Savoy operas gave birth to Broadway and West End musicals, and pantomime lives on in Britain, albeit as a quaint Christmas tradition. Silent comedies were supplanted by soundtrack movies and television, which shifted the balance between verbal and nonverbal comedy entirely. And yet, when the lights dim in the movie theater, the texture of sensation, the dance of intimacy and alienation is, in some ways, the same today as it was then. For every silent-film-goer like Thomas Burke, who recoiled from the grainy, frenetic experience, there was a James Agee, who surrendered to

the waltzes by Waldteufel, slammed out on a mechanical piano; the searing redolence of peanuts and demirep perfumery, tobacco and feet and sweat; the laughter of unrespectable people having a hell of a fine time, laughter as violent and steady and deafening as standing under a waterfall.

—1949: 74

CHAPTER FOUR

Identity

Popular Performance from Peoria to Paris

WILL VISCONTI

INTRODUCTION

The premise of this chapter is drawn from Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983): namely, that "nation" as an entity is constructed by a dominant community and promoted to others as a means of fostering an illusory identification with that dominant community (1991: 1–46). Anderson's paradigm is useful in explaining how various forms of comedic entertainment and the performance spaces that housed them were progressively co-opted by the middle class, particularly from the second half of the nineteenth century into the twentieth. Comedy acts nurtured a sense of national identity in their working-class audiences by presenting middle-class values as aspirational, even as they ostensibly provided those audiences with a space in which to navigate and validate their working-class experiences. Oppositional nationalism works as part of the same process, establishing the sense of nation relative to what it is not. Here, then, is where the examination of humor is especially relevant. By making the foreign or Other a source of comedy, national identity is reaffirmed, as is white middle-class masculinity. Moreover, through use of visual or aural shorthand, audiences are regularly presented with "unacceptable" models of behavior, which serve as punchlines in music hall, vaudeville, and cabaret in America, Australia, Britain, and France, where practices like blackface minstrelsy, dialect comedy, and sexist jokes buttress dominant attitudes (Peddie 2009: 249–50). This intersects with Anne-Marie Thiesse's discussion of linguistic nationalism (1999: 76), which arguably extends to sociolects and

dialects, as well as to the use of Anglophone or Francophone slang such as *parigot*.¹

On occasion, there was pushback by performers against the promotion of middle-class values or behavior or classification as such. London's "Queen of the Halls," Marie Lloyd, famously performed "objectionable" songs like "A Little Of What You Fancy Does You Good" in an innocuous manner followed by renditions of "Queen Of My Heart" and Tennyson's "Come Into The Garden, Maud" that imbued the ballads with heretofore absent bawdiness. This way, Lloyd proved the point to censors that interpretation and delivery were key (MacQueen-Pope 1957: 141). In many cases, however, the threat that rebel *artistes* posed was diminished by a combination of public opprobrium, commercialization, and censorship—and even by their popularity.

In establishing the terminology around which this chapter is framed, I look to the work of Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke in particular (Stets and Burke 2000; Burke and Stets 2009), where questions of identity are concerned. Identity can be defined in simplest terms as one's sense of self, which carries accompanying degrees of salience, depending on context (Stets and Burke 2000: 229–31). Hierarchies of salience are often site-specific, with popular entertainment venues as prime examples of spaces in which modern identity is enacted, its contradictions negotiated. Within these spaces, being working class theoretically carries greater salience despite the questionable degree of agency accorded to the working classes. Understanding the dialect or identifying with the working-class worlds evoked by broadsides like Ned Corvan's 1862 "Cullercoats Fish Lass," or songs about doing a "midnight flit" to avoid the bailiffs, was a point of pride for many in the audience, a source of salience and pertinence. An associated understanding of "identity" defines it as an "internalized positional designation" (Stryker [1980] 2002: 60; cited in Burke and Stets 2009: 25), which can prove problematic in terms of wanting to exceed or otherwise alter one's role identity, or not living up to it—a pressing concern during the period under consideration, and one that crosses class, ethnic, and gender lines. For our purposes, gender identity is the sense of one's maleness or femaleness within the ideological parameters of the period (despite advances in sexology, particularly between the 1880s and 1920s, it can be safely assumed that for the theater-going public, gender was a binary phenomenon).

Performers not only disseminated entrenched ideas and prejudices, they also explored how those traditional ways of thinking were constantly evolving or in conflict with the modern metropolis, as economies and populations became increasingly centered in cities. This extended to new aspirational models of selfhood for audiences, which could prove a double-edged sword in terms of onstage representation. Onstage material offered audiences an image of themselves that was frequently stylized or otherwise inaccurate, creating a "feedback loop" whereby these constructed representations were

adopted by audiences as embodied behaviors (Meyer et al. 1997: 158; Peddie 2009: 236). The nation as the driver of empire, then, was fueled by the complicity of audiences, via song, identified as one of the “cultural products of nationalism” (Anderson 1991: 141). Audiences were presented with a fictive national identity, a common culture, and a sense of self-verification through external representation (Stryker and Burke 2000: 284, 293–4; also see Snow and Oliver 1995). In so doing, audiences could enact identity-relevant behavior that was effectively a fabrication, seeing themselves validated in the ever-expanding empire (Stryker and Burke 2000: 289). The “exclusionary nationalism” that accompanies periods of uncertainty or political unrest presented performers with an additional challenge, for there was mass insecurity about what constitutes national identity, which we see during the American Civil War and the revolutions that punctuated nineteenth-century France (Thiesse 1999: 16, 17). In the years preceding and following the First World War, this pattern became all the more pronounced, though comedy was often eclipsed altogether in comic entertainment by heavy-handed celebrations of patriotic duty, the emphasis shifting from the expansion of empire to the preservation of borders.

This chapter addresses popular performance, which emerged as distinct from theater, comic opera, or other comedic practices during the first half of the nineteenth century (S.D. 2006: 33). By the mid-nineteenth century, song was a key means of delivering comedy. Thus, my focus is on song rather than on sketch comedy or on the other comic forms that were performed by the same *artistes* from the 1850s until the end of the First World War (Rodger 2010: 99). The popular entertainments examined here evolved from earlier forms. For instance, saloons or traveling shows in America evolved into vaudeville during the 1850s and 1860s, and blossomed into a “circuit” akin to that in Britain. In France, *sociétés chantantes* and *cafés chantants* (singing clubs and singing cafés, respectively) that had existed since the 1700s became café-concerts and offered mass entertainment, with the rise in the 1880s of cabaret as a bohemian echo of eighteenth-century venues. Pleasure gardens, some dating to the Georgian era, and early nineteenth-century song-and-supper clubs in Britain were superseded by music halls (Condemi 1992: 17; Clarke 1995: 9–12). From the second half of the century, venues began to coalesce into a more uniform structure of shows and the repertoires of performers, sometimes forming conglomerates or entertainment empires run by the likes of Charles Morton in Britain and Harry Rickards in Australia. These spaces and the acts presented therein continued to evolve throughout the nineteenth century, and by the 1900s had assumed the form recognizable to audiences today. Laurence Senelick (1975) contends that music hall does not represent the *zeitgeist* but a vision of the world manufactured by and for the bourgeoisie, a sentiment that is echoed in the work of Eric Lott. Lott in his turn extends T. S. Eliot’s argument

to the performance of blackface as a metaphor for cultural expression through the appropriation of another culture's medium (Lott 2013: 95).

Each section addresses urban character "types" represented through class, race (or culture), and gender identity onstage. Within these sections I explore the representation of ethnic minorities through dialect comedy, the representation of Irish immigrants, and male or female impersonation as mouthpieces in service of, but occasionally as challenges to, dominant cultural paradigms. Rather than focus specifically on blackface minstrelsy, which is undeniably a core part of the humor of the nineteenth century (and indeed into the twentieth), I instead will draw links between blackface and other comic expressions of nationalism, class solidarity, gender performance, and the assimilation or marginalization of immigrant communities. Blackface minstrelsy as a genre has been the subject of extensive study in recent decades (see Toll 1974; Sotiropoulos 2006; Lott 2013; Pickering 2016), and is situated between earlier traditions of clowning or *commedia dell'arte*, having a marked influence on the development of sketch comedy and variety from the nineteenth century to the present. Despite the inherently damaging nature of blackface, there is an acknowledgment in scholarship of the ways that some African American performers were able to work against racist agendas and stereotyping in a comparable manner to the way that music-hall performers in Britain critiqued negative representations of the working classes, or challenged existing attitudes (Bellanta 2009: 690). In 1932, T.S. Eliot argued that Marie Lloyd, who spoke out in favor of female suffrage and workers' rights both onstage and offstage, was an "expressive figure" for the working classes (Eliot [1932] 1951: 456–7), though this has been called into question in recent years.² Lloyd was implicitly supportive of women's mobility (literally and figuratively) in "Salute My Bicycle" at the same time as she included working-class observational humor in "The Coster's Wedding March." She also mocked her middle-class critics' moralistic disapproval of her performances in "Oh, Wink The Other Eye" or "Johnny Jones," also titled "What's That For, Eh?" (sung from the perspective of an inquisitive child asking innocent but inadvertently probing questions about sex, pregnancy, or courtship).

In response to the destabilizing and alienating social effects of industrialization and urbanization, there was a rise in nationalism, the nation-state presented as cohesive agent, with resultant policing of sexuality onstage and in society (Mosse 1982: 221–2). Legal restrictions and censorship in France and Britain were motivated by a desire to shape the values communicated by popular songs. The former banned the inclusion of seditious material, the latter suppressed politically charged songs, each maintaining the status quo and reasserting class hierarchies (Condemi 1992: 10, 21; Peddie 2009: 235). In France, censorship of politically incendiary songs endured into the early nineteenth century, in favor of those trumpeting colonial victories (Condemi 1992: 50–1). Popular



FIGURE 4.1: Marie Lloyd promotional poster, 1898. Photo by Hulton Archive / Stringer / Getty Images.

performance gradually morphed into a means of concealing societal flaws and inequity, fostering the illusion of “deep, horizontal comradeship” (Anderson 1991: 7) and community in a representational loop that repeated bourgeois assumptions about working-class or marginal communities back to them as accurate reflections of their experiences.

The oppositional construction of national identity in popular performance relies on what Stallybrass and White define as the “low Other” (1986: 5). In younger nations such as Australia and the United States (particularly following the Civil War), the low Other was more commonly employed around class or ethnicity-based jokes as a measure against which national identity could be reinforced through derogatory humor, and as a means of asserting unity in bourgeois nationalism against otherness. Through this process the low Other is constructed as simultaneously *apart from*—denied agency, separated, and denigrated—and *central to* the maintenance of the dominant culture, indeed, an alluring subcomponent of it (Stallybrass and White 1986: 5–6; Allen 1991: 26, 31). In the second half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, the size and cultural influence of the middle class increased, as did the fantasy of upward mobility that it represented, whether for immigrants or working-class individuals. As a result, within nineteenth-century popular entertainment, it was understood that the acceptable, dominant, and aspirational model to follow was middle class. Although popular entertainment was generally conservative in its outlook and line-ups, particularly by 1900, Italian *varietà*, which had only come into being in the late nineteenth century, and which was heavily influenced by Parisian *café-chantant* culture, proved popular with avant-garde movements like the Futurists due to its less elite status. Nevertheless, these groups were often right wing, as were performers like the Paris-based bohemian *cabarettiste* Aristide Bruant.

CLASS IDENTITY

The analysis of working-class identity that follows falls into two broad categories, the first typified by the *oeuvres* of three popular singers, the second, by the evolution of costermonger acts in Britain. Earlier in the nineteenth century, the French singer Thérésa (Emma Valadon) fostered unity through gentler observational humor, whereas, after the Franco-Prussian War, Bruant sought to foment rebellion. In Britain, by the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, Marie Lloyd tried to do both, through her songs and charitable work or involvement with the 1907 Music Hall Strike.

Central to the appeal of entertainments like music hall, café-concert, and cabaret is their origin in working-class culture, and the notion that they give voice to the socioeconomic concerns of urban audiences. Spaces and performers in Britain and France are not dissimilar in this regard. As the century progressed,

the radical potential of these forms of entertainment was diluted by the twin perils of profit and respectability. In Britain, this was both commercially and politically driven, and was attributable from the 1860s onwards to censorship of politically inflammatory or subversive material and the imposition of commercial structures. Acts were also funneled into venues like the Stoll Moss Group's Empire theater franchise—a telling name for spaces that functioned as a microcosm of empire, where lyrics, costumes, and audiences were policed and surveilled. The rise of innuendo-laden songs popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the result: an effort to bypass restrictions on political or sexual speech, and a protest against the co-opting of music hall as a propaganda tool with which to foist middle-class values on working-class spectators (Peddie 2009: 239). In Britain and North America, there was a concerted effort by the entertainment industry to repackage and market working-class experience in order to promote a false sense of unity based on a “selective reading of class identity,” which was reinforced over time, accompanied by increased sanitization of acts—acts that had originated as cultural mirrors but eventually became producers of values, with the middle class at heart (Faulk 2004: 3, 7, 30).

In France, legal restrictions on obscenity, on the use of costume, and on venue space were gradually eroded from mid-century onward; however, during the late 1800s, cabaret and café-concert became victims of their own popularity. The flood of middle-class visitors to venues hastened the *embourgeoisement* (becoming bourgeois) of French, particularly Parisian, performance spaces and acts, as well as the diminution of cabaret's capacity to shock or subvert dominant values. On both sides of the Channel, the First World War prompted a shift in humor away from critiques of the military and toward patriotic songs.

Though the British royal family was touted as the aspirational model for family and duty in the promotion of “standard” (middle-class and London-centered) language and values (Thiesse 1999: 155), acts such as those from Lancashire or Scotland nevertheless became popular beyond their towns of origin. Their legibility suggests a degree of universality in their experience and recognizability. When constructing the image of the British Isles as united, this was additionally helpful, and regional identities generally lacked the derogatory low-Other status reserved for blackface minstrelsy, though comic representations of the Irish were less positive. More common was the city/country divide, with bumpkins or naïve country dwellers in the city commonly featured in comic songs (see Waller 1987). George Formby “fra Wigan” (from Wigan) satirized this regional difference, joking “I’ve not been in England long” while on tour in London (Peddie 2009: 240). The legibility of performances extended beyond Britain as well, as the international tours undertaken by Marie Lloyd and Vesta Tilley indicate. This is reinforced by the popularity of shared songs and themes: Lloyd's 1919 song “My Old Man (Said Follow the Van)” echoes “Movin' Day,”

sung by Mae West around 1906, and Pat Rick's 1894 "Don't Burn the Cabin Down."³ All three comic songs describe a "midnight flit" before rent is due; the third is specifically anti-Irish.

Underlying themes of working-class travail was a message of unflinching devotion to queen and country; that said, the primary theme of these songs was day-to-day life, simple pleasures like ale and seaside trips, or quotidian concerns, rather than awareness of the wider world or the empire (Stedman Jones 1983: 225). Criticism of war or material deemed excessively gloomy, such as poverty, was censored or removed (Russell 1997: 90; Peddie 2009: 239). Acceptance of one's lot, communicated via comic stoicism onstage, was also implicit, and made clear in the frequency with which characters who "put on airs" were reminded of their station to comic effect (Stedman Jones 1983: 234–5).

There is a contradiction insofar as middle-class values are upheld as desirable, even as the audience is constantly reminded of its working-class status, which simultaneously reinforces class hierarchies and nurtures national solidarity. This parallels the minstrel show's "Dandy Jim" character, who embodies abolitionist and aspirational ideals but whose downfall, especially in antebellum shows, represents the maintenance of the status quo (Lott 2013: 138). In blackface performances, there sometimes existed opportunities for class critique, despite the blatant bolstering of racist attitudes. As a genre, minstrelsy ostensibly mocks up in class but down in race (Lott 2013: 116), to the extent that blackface characters evolved into shorthand for the working man regardless of ethnic background. Where victimized trickster characters "played dumb," they became more closely aligned with working-class audience members than with the white boss figure; by using stupidity as a mask, the oppressed character had the sympathy of a broader proportion of the audience. After the Civil War, when African American performers were finally permitted onstage (though they too had to wear burnt cork and "black up"), they used this trope as an opportunity to push back against negative ideas within the art form (Toll 1974: 22; Allen 1991: 171; Nowatzki 2006: 173; Lott 2013: 72). From their position as low Other, African American characters or singers could offer social critique in which workers more generally figured as low Other (Allen 1991: 170). Again, critique was facilitated through a character like Dandy Jim, who offered a double parody as an urban dandy reflecting back white aspirational behavior and imitating middle-class mannerisms.

An integral tool for social critique and creating rapport with audiences was the use of language and slang that they understood. As a result, being working class or African American was potentially accorded greater salience, as it granted the listener greater access to the material, or enabled them to grasp more subtle gags and deeper content. In minstrelsy, Will Marion Cook's lyrics encouraged African American pride, delivering uplifting messages through dialect, but, in so doing, masked the message to non-African American spectators, which



FIGURE 4.2: Sheet music for E.W. Mackney's "The Whole Hog or None," London, c. 1850. Photo by Transcendental Graphics / Getty Images.

complicates the claim that dialect can be deployed as an effective form of social protest (Sotiropoulos 2006: 10). Bert Williams' jokes used language that was humorous to African American and white audiences alike, but for different reasons, by playing with the nuances of wording and delivery, as in Cook's song "Swing Along" (Morath 1979: 116–17) in the 1903 vaudeville musical comedy *In Dahomey*, which featured an all-African American cast. Alternatively, sometimes only part of the audience was "in" on the joke: accounts survive of laughter from African American audiences in segregated venues, while white spectators were silent and uncomprehending (Sotiropoulos 2006: 4). Marie Lloyd played with comparable levels of knowingness, letting her audience in on the joke, or making jokes that working-class spectators understood but which were not at anybody's expense. She, like others, used her physicality, often winks and facial expressions, to make her delivery as important as the lyrics, which helped audiences to identify layers of meaning in her material (Bailey 1994: 150). Delivery was simultaneously important in order to foster a bond with the audience and dodge censorship, playing with double meanings and concealing jokes or contentious material in plain sight rather than relying on slang.

In Britain, costermonger songs and their use of cockney slang are contemporaneous with the French taste for plumbing the urban underworld for artistic and comic inspiration, something encouraged by French poet Charles Baudelaire (1846: 128–9). Intrinsically voyeuristic, these songs glamorized poverty and cultural marginalization. Costers came to embody not just the working classes (for middle-class audiences) but also the rise of market spaces that sprang up in the metropolis, both official and unauthorized (Booth 1903: 260). The coster onstage evolved from being viewed satirically to replicating embellished representations (see Scott 2002). The change of the costermonger from joke to fabrication reinforced assumptions about the prevalence of domestic violence in working-class communities and reified mannerisms and language (Scott 2002: 255). The concocted representation of working-class communities was then used to reinforce middle-class assumptions about them, and to justify class hierarchies. The language used by cockney characters functioned as cultural shorthand for "Otherness" in the same way that the stage dialect of blackface performers in America and Australia created an oppositional model of behavior and culture (Allen 1991: 173; Bellanta 2009: 679; also see Detsi-Diamanti 2007). During the First World War, the stoicism embodied by cockney characters was transferred to wartime spirit and patriotism, encouraging the fulfillment of shared duty alongside shared identity, which Charles Rearick sees as intrinsically artificial (1988: 52).

Where British songs during the first half of the nineteenth century expressed sympathy for workers and were performed by those who identified as working class (Harker 1981: 36, 44–5), the commercialization of music hall

and its co-opting of working-class comedy for middle-class audiences (Faulk 2004: 21, 190) diluted the original anti-authoritarian spirit in the performance of dialect, hence in cockney or costermonger songs. Numbers were structured and marketed in a way that not only rendered them less accurate in their depiction of working-class life, reducing their threat to established hierarchies, but also affirmed hegemonic ideas of class and duty at the expense of genuine representation of working-class experience (Bailey 1994: 140; Peddie 2009: 237).

The identification of singers with their audience was an important element, since many had direct experience of being working class and downwardly mobile. To this end, Hoxton-born Marie Lloyd, who worked her way to stardom, was identified with the working classes (and indeed explicitly stood with them). Following her death, T. S. Eliot elevated Lloyd not only to the status of mouthpiece and proletarian “expressive figure,” but she became a proxy for them, for the benefit of bourgeois audiences (Faulk 2004: 44). Hand-in-hand, then, with the salience of working-class identity in a music-hall or café-concert venue was the cachet accorded performers, a cultural authenticity that would ensure a more receptive audience.

The French singer Thérésa positioned herself explicitly as *du peuple* (of the people), an image reinforced by contemporaries praising her as the working-class equivalent of opera diva Adelina Patti (see Rochefort and Thérésa 1865; Caradec and Weill 1980: 45; Conway 2004: 39–40). She directly engaged her audience through her use of slang, singing parody songs and utilizing the *scie*, a repeated chorus that facilitated audience participation, as in British music hall. A common theme in Thérésa’s repertoire was regionally themed material akin to comic British acts, such as “Nourrice Sur Lieux” (“Live-in Nanny”), a reference to class, specifically to the many urban migrants hired as wet-nurses for wealthy Second Empire families. Often, these women came from Bourgogne, Brittany, or towns from adjacent areas like Bourg-en-Bresse, referenced in Thérésa’s lyrics and in caricatures that depict Thérésa delivering the song in regional costume. Added to the dynamic of her humor, which mocked the Prussians but not the French and thereby satisfied or assuaged bruised notions of national pride, Thérésa was able to successfully navigate working-class popularity alongside invitations to the Imperial Court, and remained bawdy without exceeding boundaries of propriety.

Singers’ direct experiences allowed greater space for depth of social critique and granted a degree of agency to working-class audiences (Peddie 2009: 237). As a result, Marie Lloyd and Thérésa were seen as more authentic performers of working-class narratives. Likewise, Aristide Bruant’s earlier life of poverty and downward mobility conferred authority on him and realism to his songs, as well as drawing him closer to the people about whom he sang rather than to his bourgeois audience. Before he found success in bohemia and left behind the



FIGURE 4.3: “La nouvelle chanson de Thérèse [Nourrice Sur Lieux]” (Thérèse’s new song [Live-in Nanny]) by André Gill in *La Lune*, 1866. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

bars where he had previously sung, his earlier engagements were in Belleville venues catering primarily to working-class and poorer audiences (Wilson 2008: 197). Bruant’s songs were generally humorous or patriotic but not always both. Like Thérèse, Bruant used working-class *gouaille* (cheeky patter) in his songs and audience banter, explicitly identifying himself as working class, and within a continuum of *chansonniers populaires* (Wilson 2008: 199, 200, 210). He employed *fumisme* (use of parody against authority figures) within his songs and patter to challenge class divisions following the Franco-Prussian War (Kenny 2004: 26, 29), with Paris as central, and Montmartre as the core of the modern city. In focusing on marginal figures rather than on workers *per se*, bourgeois audiences were not overly put off by Bruant, and enticed by the voyeuristic frisson of hearing stories about the dispossessed while slumming in cabaret venues in working-class districts like Montmartre (Caradec and Weill 1980: 99; Rearick 1988: 46–7, 51).

Moving into the twentieth century, *embourgeoisement* was accelerated not only by the consumerist demands of middle-class audiences, but by profit-

driven management. French venues became victims of their own success, entering the mainstream and losing their ability to shock, along with the freedom to heckle and criticize. The same trend continued elsewhere. Between impresarios and legal restrictions, material performed in Britain and America was tightly controlled, some venues going so far as to excise contentious material. An additional source of restraint was the growing interest among audiences in less nostalgic subject matter. The children and grandchildren of workers and migrants had a greater interest in aspirational models of living and in representations of wealth than in class solidarity or in stories of struggle. Among second-generation migrants, the pursuit of upward mobility and the legitimacy conferred by middle-class identity predominated, with assimilation and integration becoming priorities (Allen 1991: 183; Rodger 2010: 139). As marketing and *embourgeoisement* took hold in popular performance and venues, the disjunction between representation and its accuracy increased, with accuracy sacrificed to the promotion of middle-class and patriotic values (Kenny 2004: 22). Although comic songs could and did enunciate social problems, these problems were often treated as sources of humor or were toned down for the benefit of middle-class audiences.

RACIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES ONSTAGE

The following discussion of ethnic, racial, and culturally-based humor in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century performance examines “dialect” or ethnicity-based comedy (comprised of performers impersonating and parodying minorities such as the Irish, Italians, Germans, or Yiddish-speaking immigrants), much of which was influenced by conventions within minstrelsy. In the United States, comic staple characters parodied class, cultural difference, and foreignness, and, in this way, vaudeville in particular functioned as a microcosm of the emerging nation and as a mirror for national identity (S.D. 2006: 165; Rodger 2010: 98–9). For British audiences, conceptions of race were as tied to affirming national character as to differentiating themselves from emerging migrant communities (Robbins 1988: 10), whose differences were presented as shortcomings and exploited for comic potential. That immigrants were common sources of comedy is double-edged: it either represents the assimilation of the unknown into the dominant culture through laughter, or a means of venting resentment against new arrivals (Distler 1979: 58). Minstrelsy not only marginalized African Americans, but served to complement the Americanization of Irish and later Jewish migrants (Rogin 1998: 2), shoring up their newly adopted American identity by uniting them against a different low Other.

One of the most frequently represented migrant communities, more so in the United States, was the Irish. Like minstrelsy, representations of Irishness played into and worked against existing stereotypes, particularly when

performed by Irish people (Kift 1996: 46). American representations of the Irish gave vent to resentment at the influx of immigrants, particularly following the Irish Famine of the 1840s and 1850s, whereas British attitudes were tinged with political and imperial concerns. Alongside themes of regional identity and the urban/rural divide, British music hall regularly showcased what Dagmar Kift calls “colonialist contempt” of Black and Irish people (1996: 45–6), reinforcing the unity of the British against a foreign Other. Unsurprisingly, the same attitude recurs in Australian popular performance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, extending to indigenous people. In some cases, Irish and African American characters were interchangeable as the low (and) Other, filling the same function in terms of narrative, comic relief, and the vices they were believed to embody (Pickering 1986: 72, 84, 86; Nowatzki 2006: 162).

The representation of the Irish was more closely tied to blackface by the fact that it was not uncommon for Irish performers to specialize in blackface, like the American-based duo Harrigan and Hart,⁴ in order to assert their own patriotism and affirm their assimilation via the denigration of African Americans (Nowatzki 2006: 162–3; Lott 2013: 98). In Australia, the same trend was noticeable both on- and offstage. The two identities were conflated in the eyes of authorities, with the Irish described during the late 1800s by the colonial press in terms of blackness (Bellanta 2009: 677). The connection between Irish and African American people, the assumption of inferiority, was reinforced by caricatures in the popular press of both communities as dark-featured and resembling monkeys (Nowatzki 2006: 170–3).

When performing ethnic and cultural or racially-based comedy, popular artists frequently relied on grotesque and cartoonish or over-the-top physicality or appearances as an extra layer of humor or visual shorthand, though some relied on less offensive stereotypes. Thus, ethnic depictions ranged from Harry Lauder’s “canny Scot” (see Schweitzer 2011) to the exaggerated make-up of blackface minstrelsy (S.D. 2006: 137, 148). This was coupled with aural humor beyond the lyrics themselves. The dialect confected by white performers in blackface, or the use of nonsense words in Irish parody songs, were devices also used in representations of indigenous populations to establish their “inferior” identity relative to white middle-class imperialist masculinity.

In addition to songs with gibberish lyrics, sentimental songs that were usually performed by women—something common to blackface minstrelsy and to representations of the Irish—were performed by men for comic effect, in order to question the manliness of the singer (and by extension, of the community being parodied) (Rodger 2010: 98, 103). Conversely, minstrel songs often depicted African American bodies as hypersexualized (Lott 2013: 108). Not only was sentiment emphasized, but patriotism as well, though expressions of Irish nationalism were more acceptable on American stages than on British or

colonial ones, particularly after a rise in Irish militancy in nineteenth-century Britain. The First World War signaled another change in representations of the Irish and Scottish, with the latter being upheld as the incarnation of “good” imperial subjects, though Irish soldiers’ contributions were acknowledged. As mentioned above, the First World War also prompted changes in how the military was represented onstage in France (Watson 2008: 530, 540–51). Elsewhere, songs like “It’s A Long Way To Tipperary” (popularized onstage in Britain by Florrie Forde, an Australian-born singer) became synonymous with patriotism as a result of their popularity as marching songs, and were divorced from their content—in this case, the stereotype of the dim-witted “Paddy.”

In the United States and Great Britain, the gradual displacement of the figure of the Irish idler or simpleton by the sharp-tongued servant as a comic stock character (S.D. 2006: 148) reflected the increased number of Irish people in manual labor and service positions, just as changing representations of female laborers in late-nineteenth-century Parisian comedy was traceable to the influx of Morvandelle or Bretonne wet-nurses. The sharp-tongued Irishwoman was frequently played by a cross-dressed man, as distinct from a female impersonator. Arthur Lucan’s *Old Mother Riley* act, created on the pre-war British stage and continued through sketches and songs on film, exemplifies this trend. Such acts arguably cast aspersions on Irish femininity in the same way that the performance of “unmanly” songs by Black or Irish characters did on Black or Irish masculinity, again establishing a low Other against which American or British middle-class femininity is offset. The creation of the “mammy” in blackface, like Billy Kersands’ Aunt Jemima, followed the same pattern of grotesque cross-dressed characters as a tool to prop up whiteness and masculinity and to reify assumptions about gender, sexuality, and alterity (Toll 1979: 25–6). Mammy stereotypes were repurposed in representations of the Irish by American performers, employed as a foil for more acceptable middle-class models of behavior.

Representations of Irish women by men echo representations of working-class cockney women by performers like Dan Leno, and are similarly linked not so much to comic critiques of working-class identity *per se* as to comedy about individuals affecting manners above their station. Some performers fused jokes about the Irish with jokes about class and affectation. At the turn of the century, George Monroe performed his specialty, the song “My Aunt Bridget,” as a harridan housewife: a portly and unattractive figure whose looks were played for laughs as much as her manners, and who, despite her uncouthness, puts on airs. The comedy of aping another social class often derived from malapropisms. We see this in early minstrelsy, where the mangled phrases of the interlocutor, or the later character of “Zip Coon,” undercut his pomposity. Beyond class “impersonation” and the appearance of a man in a dress, the comedy of the Irish woman in popular entertainment was often rooted in notions of Irish

sexuality, again calling to mind the simultaneous anxiety about and derision of African American people as lustful or mannish (when female) and unmanly (when male) (see Mooney 2015).

After the most significant waves of Irish migration to America, as well as to Britain and Australia, Irish identity onstage was established against more recent arrivals, particularly eastern European Jewish or southern European migrants (Nowatzki 2006: 170), some of whom created their own dedicated performance circuits with intercommunity ridicule as staples (Sandrow 1979: 89). Dialect comedy reached the peak of its popularity between 1875 and 1905 (Distler 1979: 36–7), particularly the “Dutch” comic act (a corruption of *deutsch*) as a distinct genre, which parodied German immigrants. Although Dutch acts originated in North America, they found similar popularity with British audiences (Machray [1902] 1984: 115).



FIGURE 4.4: American comedy team Joe Weber and Lew Fields as their Dutch Act characters, Mike and Meyer. Photo by Bettmann / Getty Images.

Dutch acts combined ethnic stereotypes (such as fondness for beer) with linguistic awkwardness or word-play and physical humor—often slapstick violence (Allen 1991: 221; S.D. 2006: 49). The comedy of Dutch acts was primarily linguistically based or focused on the Germans' lack of sophistication, unlike the vociferous criticism of African Americans or the Irish (Rodger 2010: 98, 108). In America, Italian immigrants received comparable attention, with dialect songs like "Mariutch (Make-a The Hootch a-ma-Cooch) Down At Coney Isle," sung by a young Mae West (Eells and Musgrove 1984: 23). By creating a shorthand through comic stereotypes, music hall and vaudeville relied on oppositional representations of other cultures or ethnicities, uniting audiences against the threatening or ridiculous Other. The didactic function of acceptable models of behavior through comparison with the low Other sometimes overlapped with the same function applied to marriage and gender roles.

GENDER IDENTITY

From the pitfalls of marriage and courtship to representations of domestic violence and models for acceptable or normalized (if not normal) behavior, gender provided ample fodder for comic numbers, particularly in the latter half of the century and into the twentieth century. One alarming common thread is that of violence against women in comedy. Parallel to sentimentality and patriotism is the virulent chauvinism found across French- and English-language songs (Caradec and Weill 1980: 185). Australian larrikin humor, Parisian cabaret numbers performed by men like Aristide Bruant, and music-hall numbers such as those by Dan Leno regularly depict women as the butt of jokes, particularly between the 1870s and early 1900s. More than putting the joke "on" women, in the form of perpetuating stereotypes of shrewish wives, unfaithful lovers, or perfidious sex workers, women were literally the punchlines for sexual humor and outright violence (Allen 1991: 238). Rejecting both violence against women and the limitations placed upon them, singers like Eva Tanguay asserted their own identities as modern women (not necessarily in the model of the New Woman).

Representations of gender roles were influenced, and in some cases dramatically changed, by sustained periods of unrest and conflict, be they within or beyond a country's borders, and served as a barometer of anxiety about the effect that conflict might have in permanently reshaping gender identity. Following the Civil War in America, for instance, there were corresponding anxieties about women's changing roles in society and the renewed interest in women moving beyond the private sphere, hence the level of vitriolic criticism directed at acts like Lydia Thompson's British Blondes tour (1868–9), which featured topical humor, comic burlesque numbers *en travesti*, and popular songs (Rodger 2010: 164).

Of the performers active during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some, like Lloyd, became representative of working-class female identity, which suggested that her material was more legitimate as a mirror of the values or mannerisms of the working classes (Faulk 2004: 46). However, her circumstances served as a warning to anybody who transgressed boundaries of class or gender. When Lloyd refused to conform to middle-class notions of respectability, or she critiqued existing structures (evidenced by her divorces, turbulent personal life, and involvement in suffragette activism), and despite her involvement with patriotic causes, she was criticized, and her contributions to morale-boosting elided or ignored. Conversely, Vesta Tilley, a male impersonator who regularly performed in a soldier's uniform, was recognized for her public appearances at hospitals and her participation in recruitment drives. In her performance persona, Tilley, in contrast to Lloyd, avoided innuendo, but offstage, both women tried to craft a respectable image, Tilley in particular, when out of costume, appearing ladylike to a fault, given the scrutiny to which female performers were subject.

On the music-hall stage, attitudes toward marriage were varied—even within a singer's repertoire of songs. In "Waiting at the Church," sung by male impersonator Vesta Victoria, marriage was presented as disastrous rather than desirable (Kift 1996: 176), while in her song "Poor John," marriage was presented somewhat fatalistically as inevitable. In both instances, however, middle-class domestic ideology is eventually upheld. As the century advanced, domesticity was increasingly presented as a cultural corrective to the threat posed by feminism, by campaigns for female suffrage, for instance, or the appearance of the New Woman in Britain and North America. Paradoxically, the romanticized domesticity modelled endlessly onstage was a way of life from which working-class aspirants were essentially barred by circumstance.

Since at least the 1860s, the figure of the abused wife was a staple of music-hall comedy, appearing in circus and minstrel numbers as well, humorous caricature undercutting the gravity of the violence being depicted. The clown Thomas Lawrence made violence against women and unflattering stereotypes of women as shrewish and unattractive core parts of his act, as his notebooks for gags can attest (Bratton and Featherstone 2006: 152). Dan Leno joked about nagging mothers-in-law, pairing working-class domestic violence and middle-class sensibilities in "Her Mother's At The Bottom Of It All," when he mentions that one dare not hit a woman: "... well, I daren't." Between the 1880s and his death in 1904, Dan Leno's career included frequent cross-dressing roles. Much of his *oeuvre* was informed by his work in pantomime, which remained a popular form of entertainment in Britain—one populated by cross-dressed performers, including, briefly, by Marie Lloyd. In music hall, Leno sang numbers such as "I'm Waiting For Him Tonight," a comic parody of "Queen Of My Heart." He mingled pathos and humor with sexist lyrics,

costumed as a clownishly ugly woman crooning about how her husband beats her. The song satirizes sentimentality (and middle-class domesticity), when the wife gets her revenge and returns her husband's beating. In joking lightheartedly about the foibles of working-class men, it reinforces class prejudices. In addition to satirizing sentimentality in general, these songs were parodies of the contemporaneous genre of sentimental song, particularly as it relates to marriage (King 1993: 28–30), like Albert Chevalier's "My Old Dutch" (from "Duchess of Fife"; rhyming slang for "wife," rather than *deutsch*).

In numbers that made men or masculinity the butt of the joke, this was usually through the prism of domestic cluelessness (in Dan Leno's songs) or class affectation (Bruant and male impersonators). The "masher" or "swell" was a favorite figure of derision, either because of his questionable masculinity, or because he aped his betters—a familiar comic theme in British and American popular entertainment (Rodger 2010: 134–5). Comedy derived from the exposure of the masher as a fraud. Alternatively, his pastimes, designated as "feminine," speak to his absurdity and lack of self-awareness. Across Francophone and Anglophone acts, satires of men "slumming" and efforts to map sexist humor over ethnic humor (working-class or ethnically "Other" men beating their wives and mismanaging their money) (Mintz 1996: 22) reconcile two divergent ideological impulses. On the one hand, these performances constitute proletarian pushback against bourgeois involvement in popular entertainment; on the other hand, they perpetuate bourgeois assumptions about an Othered demographic that fails to adhere to middle-class models of respectability, assimilation, and service to queen, country, or economy.

Although the toff was generally performed by male impersonators, most famously by Vesta Tilley and Ella Shields, some male singers—George Leybourne, for example—also parodied the slumming gent. Leybourne became famous for his alter ego, "Champagne Charlie," who cultivated a style more capitalist than nationalist. Rather than sing about marriage or work, Leybourne sang of nightlife establishments where supper rooms could be rented hourly to entertain female guests. His lyrics were peppered with product placement of brands like Moët, alerting his audience to an easy means by which they could fashion identity through acquisitiveness. In France, popular performance was generally male-dominated, and acts like Dranem (Armand Ménard) paralleled Leybourne with his dandified-but-rough persona. Where engagement with the city appeared in material, singers like Paulus (Jean-Paul Habans) recounted tales of Parisian urban types and their (mis)adventures (Caradec and Weill 1980: 81). The *gommeux* genre of French dandy songs expanded to include the female equivalent, the *gommeuse*, sometimes wearing male attire, but also known for elaborate and hyperfeminine costumes.

By the late 1880s, the implicit class criticism enacted in male impersonation was further diluted, when the focus shifted from the false masculinity of the

toff to his affectation. Rather than satirize class or the crossing of socioeconomic barriers, by the late 1880s, male impersonators like Vesta Tilley were directing their satiric fire at consumerism and leisure culture, with pastimes serving as markers of class identity (Vicinus 1974: 261–2; Huggins 2000: 593; Rodger 2010: 123). From 1914 to 1918, male impersonators de-emphasized the humor of their acts where possible, but increased the patriotic content, serving as morale-boosters and mouthpieces for the war effort. Tilley adapted her repertoire to include more patriotic songs, capitalizing on the vogue for jingoistic material and less pointed humor, dispensing with her usual practice of parodying the hypermasculine mannerisms of soldiers or the inauthenticity of the civilian toff. Furthermore, geopolitical strife and domestic political scandals, when mentioned in performance, were not necessarily treated humorously. Censorship ensured that comic songs did not stray from quotidian or observational humor (Kift 1996: 41–2). In France, the soldier, once a comic character, the *comique troupier*, who had helped audiences process trauma and reclaim agency lost during the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune, metamorphosed by the turn of the century, and especially after the First World War, into an object of national pride (Caradec and Weill 1980: 69, 137).

The years leading up to the First World War marked a shift in the way that other comic types were represented. Take Australian “larrikin” humor, as exemplified by performer Roy Rene. Originally an urban “tough,” who was associated with petty crime, racially-motivated violence, and gang rape, the



FIGURE 4.5: Publicity postcard for male impersonator Vesta Tilley, c. 1910. Photo by Transcendental Graphics / Getty Images.

larrikin progressively softened his edges. By the time Rene moved into vaudeville around 1910, the larrikin had evolved into a cheeky, antiauthoritarian figure in Australian comedy and a proud symbol of the national psyche, particularly during and following the First World War, when he was associated with the Australian troops (see Bellanta 2012). “Larrikinism” has parallels in American, French, and British working-class comedic types, as well as in blackface character types like the bumpkin-in-the-city or Dandy Jim, reinforced by songs like “The Larrikin’s Hop” in 1887. Offstage, the larrikin was perceived by the public as a working-class figure akin to the British “swell” (Toll 1979: 31) or the American Bowery Boy, who was associated with violence and with membership in a gang (which, in larrikin slang, is a “push”). There is overlap, too, with cockneys and disenfranchised Irish communities. When featured onstage, however, the representation of larrikins flatteringly reflected their presence in the audience, since they were known for their regular attendance at minstrel shows and music halls (Bellanta 2009: 678, 688). Tracing the evolving persona of the larrikin from feisty ruffian to endearingly irreverent “mate” in vaudeville and variety acts, one element remains consistent: the larrikin’s comic propensity to thumb his nose at convention. The valorization of qualities once linked to illegality and crime, and their incorporation into Australia’s national identity, was a process aided by popular performance and media, with comedy as the primary vehicle. The status of celebrities like Rene played a similar part, as did changes to the urban landscape.

The privilege of speaking truth to power and of mocking gender roles remained steadfastly skewed in favor of male performers. At the height of his career between the 1880s and 1890s, it can be argued that Aristide Bruant challenged bourgeois masculinity, though more through his patter than his songs. In his songs, however, Bruant never questioned male privilege or critiqued misogyny, instead making women the butt of his jokes, when he wasn’t heckling them in the audience, calling them whores or other epithets. He challenged bourgeois masculinity, however, by mercilessly insulting slumming male spectators (Wilson 2008: 207–8). Bruant maintained that he played with audience expectations by mocking the bourgeoisie, but conceded that, though his vitriol was genuine, audiences laughed, possibly undercutting the social commentary in his songs about outcasts and poverty (Rearick 1988: 46; Sonn 1989: 131). Bruant’s socioeconomic focus places him in the tradition of *chanson française* (born of politically minded *chanson engagée*, a nationalistic and revolutionary genre dating to the 1700s), which was connected to notions of French national identity and selfhood but, at the same time, was essentially Parisian (Deniot n.d.). Although *chanson* was a male-dominated genre, some women made their mark on it. Yvette Guilbert, for example, combined physicality and suggestiveness with otherwise innocuous lyrics, a form of anti-bourgeois rebellion seen, by Isabelle Marc, as expressing *esprit gaulois* (Gallic

spirit, a concept with a long pedigree, accompanying France's stronger sense of nationhood) (Marc 2013: 364–6).

In terms of challenging women's roles, Canadian-born singer Eva Tanguay exemplifies how comic performance was deployed to unsettle ideas in the new century about accepted and acceptable expressions of femininity. Billed as the "I Don't Care Girl" after her 1905 hit song, Tanguay's act played with overlapping themes, including the place of the modern (American) woman in urban space. Abroad, she typified American liberty; at home, Tanguay challenged ideologies of race and masculinity, revisiting issues raised by Lydia Thompson in the 1860s as a streetwise, unflappable, and therefore unsettling woman (Allen 1991: 28). Tanguay upended ideals of femininity and sanity, as well as manners, providing a model of what not to do that served equally as a parodic



FIGURE 4.6: Canadian singer and vaudeville performer Eva Tanguay, c. 1909. Photo by Underwood Archives / Getty Images.

reflection of white masculinity in her unpredictability and assertiveness (Casey 2015: 87, 94). More threateningly, she mocked pseudo-scientific discourses about white supremacy by alluding to non-white sexuality and by constructing her own sexuality as comic and unrestrained (Casey 2015: 99, 100). Her performance of “primal” behavior and insouciance reinforced, in some ways, middle-class fears of foreign, Othered sexualities, but, by deploying humor, she also defused the threat posed by the assertive “mad” woman. At the same time, Tanguay taunted audiences with her portrayal of an uncontrollable woman who operated outside middle-class codes of morality. She did this by presenting herself as partly indigenous. Her “savage” behavior was therefore justified according to the racist ethnology of the day, giving her license that would otherwise be denied her. Tanguay encapsulated these fears in her songs as much as her style, performing her freedom onstage and off, and delivering suggestive lyrics that potentially served as an exhortation to female audience members to follow her lead.

Tanguay also toyed with her audience’s anxieties about the New Woman, another emblematic figure of the modern metropolis and a popular target of parody. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the New Woman embodied female independence and consumerist agency (Glenn 1998: 54–5), and was presented as an “everywoman” despite being white and middle class (Casey 2015: 88). Her class therefore rendered her more threatening since she incarnated a threat from within, rather than a fantasy of upward mobility (Hamessley 2007: 14). The appearance of the New Woman as a character type in popular entertainment coincided with the increased presence and empowerment of women as comic performers. In the early twentieth century, female comics were beginning to move beyond race or ethnicity-based humor (Glenn 1998: 47–8). By performing popular new “types” like the New Woman, even if satirically, Tanguay and other female performers gained professional agency, as well as increased prominence and participation in cultural practices and the public sphere (Glenn 1998: 69).

CONCLUSION

By the outbreak of the First World War, middle-class identity was the structuring logic of comedy acts in western Europe, North America, and Australia. What had been dismissed as “vulgar” by the middle classes in the mid-nineteenth century was now considered acceptable entertainment for a broad cross-section of the population (Sotiropoulos 2006: 5). The middle-class co-opting of comic entertainment was enabled in part by the policing and censorship of impresarios, and in Britain, by the Lord Chamberlain and by strict controls of the material onstage. American theater-owner B.F. Keith removed anything contentious from bills, including ethnicity-based humor, domestic jokes (mother-in-law

jokes, for instance), and jokes about the police. In sanitizing comedy, Keith effectively divorced it from modern urban identities and from the issues that mattered most to people's lives (Allen 1991: 188–9; see McLean 1960: 82–95). Where early music hall and popular entertainments were predominantly working class in audience composition and in subject matter, by the turn of the century, music-hall audiences had become socioeconomically diverse. The golden age of music hall and vaudeville was short-lived, however, for, despite their mass appeal, these once-popular comedic forms went into decline, hastened by the War, the Great Depression, and the meteoric rise of film (compounded later by television) (Vicinus 1974: 239–40; Höher 1986: 73). Of the performers still alive or active, some moved to radio, like Fanny Brice and Roy Rene, others to film.

One of the immediate consequences of appropriating comedic entertainment as a vehicle for patriotic and nationalist sentiment during the war was that comedy's potential as a site of resistance to middle-class ideology decreased. Following the First World War, and again after the Second World War, live comedy spectacles became more nostalgic than innovative. They were spaces for audiences to encounter the characters from a bygone era, characters who had once deftly and lightheartedly navigated the labyrinth of modern identities. The content of live comedy entertainment remained anchored, to a certain extent, in the nineteenth century, and the "imagined community" constructed by these routines was structured by a yearning for an idealized past. The format, however, of amateur nights or of popular entertainment in general, proved more resilient. In the early days of television, and up to the present, the popularity of the variety show has continued with the *X-Factor* and similar series, presenting many of the same "turns" that were regularly seen across Europe, North America, and Australia in the late nineteenth century. These twenty-first-century acts are rigorously policed by management—as were their nineteenth-century predecessors—to project an image that appeals to the middle-class sense of self.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Body

From Grimaldi to Chaplin

SARA LODGE

TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Bodies are funny: both funny peculiar and funny ha ha. They grow; they shrink. They fart; they fall apart. They attract and repel us. Indeed, arguably, the body is the central subject and object of all comedy. As the philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner contends, humans experience an “eccentric positionality” because we both “have bodies and are bodies.”¹ We are aware of a consciousness that appears separate from our corporeal existence and can reflect on it; yet we are also always *in* our bodies, actuated by physical needs and desires, dependent on processes that produce behavior we might consciously prefer to repudiate. Laughter, in Plessner’s view, happens when we are forced to confront the paradox of our doubled existence—the ways in which we are not fully in control of ourselves (1970: 36). Losing control is key to the pleasure that audiences take in a comic character slipping, whether on a literal banana skin or metaphorically into the soup. That slippage may produce a sensation in the audience of similarly relaxing physical boundaries: giving way to an unguarded smile, a “belly laugh,” or even a “fit of the giggles.” The relationship between the body we see or imagine in comedy and our own bodies is thus a powerful one. It may excite feelings of superiority; yet it also creates the conditions for intimacy. William Thackeray argued at a charitable event in 1852: “I know no such provocative as humour. It is an irresistible sympathiser; it surprises you into compassion: you are laughing and disarmed, and suddenly forced into tears” (Thackeray 1968: 279).

The nineteenth-century comedian most adept at exploiting the full emotional range of physical comedy was the great clown, Joseph Grimaldi. On his death in 1838, a journalist commented:

In the streets, the middling and the lower classes almost worshipped him . . . on the boards, he was a living temple erected to broad humour, his mouth was a portal capable of the most purse-like contraction or awful expansion—he could fit it to the reception of a tobacco-pipe, or the introduction of a peck-loaf. His eyes were able to carry on business without the aid of each other;—one eye was quietly silent and serious, whilst the other would be engaged in the most elaborate and mischievous wink. What eye-brows too!—they would go up like a couple of umbrellas, or one would ascend and the other remain to superintend the wink: and the very cheeks had a muscular power of action, of which none but those who had seen the astounding workings of them could form any idea! . . . His knees became funny—his throat swelled with fun—his freakishness . . . oozed out at the palms of his hands.

—*Essex Herald* 1838: 4

In this description, Grimaldi's body is a living miscellany: his eyebrows are a pair of umbrellas; his mouth is both a tightly pulled purse and a door that can admit impossibly large objects. His body parts also seem capable of independent action: one eye can adopt a different expression from the other; his knees are funny in themselves. The capaciousness of his body is essential to the temple of "broad humour" it becomes, welcoming all-comers.

Grimaldi's clowning was mostly wordless. This reflected legal necessity as well as dramatic convention. Only two London theaters, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, were licensed to perform spoken drama. Minor or "illegitimate" theaters like Sadler's Wells therefore capitalized on the possibilities of spectacle, of acrobatics, musical theater, and dance routines. Grimaldi would sing patter songs in which sung verses were interspersed with snatches of absurd, nonsensical dialogue. These maneuvers circumvented the prohibition on spoken drama, but also created conditions in which the body could be allowed to communicate at an emotional, visceral level—through mime, gesture, babble. The Clown's behavior could express aspects of adult and child simultaneously. Grimaldi excelled at the physical aspects of his routine, performing daring acrobatic feats—jumps, dances, pratfalls, and transformation scenes involving elaborate stage machinery. He acted the business of stealing and of tricking others. Yet the foundation of the Clown's character was childlike naiveté: fear, boyish joy, and wonder. Audiences responded to his antics physically. The *Champion*, in 1815, described the convulsions of laughter Grimaldi produced in "all parties . . . their arms, shoulders, features, and whole body": the pit of

the theater became a “sea of pleasure . . . and the people roll back and forwards like waves” (*Champion* 1815: 421). This image is striking for its vision of bodies united in elemental pleasure, all moving and moved together.

Grimaldi’s pantomimes provide a good example of how nineteenth-century physical comedy both draws on traditional, popular forms, themes, and routines, and gives them a distinctively new, metropolitan turn. Grimaldi was an entrepreneur: designing new and elaborate kinds of stage machinery to give his seasonal reappearances a “wow” factor. He created a coach with four large cheeses for wheels, drawn by live dogs, which pulled him in triumph off the stage. His costume in *Harlequin and the Red Dwarf* featured coalscuttles for boots, horseshoes as heels, candlesticks as spurs, a woman’s muff as his hat, and a black tippet, which turned into enormous moustaches. In *Harlequin and Asmodeus* (1810), Grimaldi, as Joe Frankenstein, constructed a person out of vegetables, with carrots for fingers, marrow legs, and a huge cow-cabbage for a body. This monster turned on its creator, and Grimaldi proceeded to have a comic stage fight, using turnips as boxing-gloves, with the vegetable man. Nobody who saw this astonishing act ever forgot it.



FIGURE 5.1: Joseph Grimaldi as Clown in *Harlequin & Asmodeus* or *Cupid on Crutches*, Theatre Royal Covent Garden, December 26, 1810, from a drawing by R. Norman, published by Rudolph Ackermann, London, England, 1811. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

In Grimaldi's pantomimes, the city of London and its vast proliferation of objects for sale become themselves part of the comic body represented on stage. In the pantomime *London, or Harlequin and Time* (1813), Grimaldi sang a nonsense song about London itself being consumed. The song introduces a robber who runs away with, and then swallows, the Monument, a sixty-one-meter high column erected to commemorate the rebuilding of the City of London after the Great Fire of 1666. When the thief is detected by the watchman, he is found to have pocketed several other London landmarks, including Aldgate Pump (his hat) and the clock of St. Paul's Cathedral (on his watch fob). As Jane Moody remarks, "the activity of consumption (whether food, domestic or cultural goods such as images and exhibitions) created a collusive, imaginative alliance between the Clown and the spectator. In the eyes of the Clown, London simply provided a glorious, inexhaustible miscellany of objects, both from nature and from culture, to be consumed or reimagined through acts of comic reconstruction" (Moody 2000: 219). Grimaldi's imaginative routines can be understood in terms of the universal "grotesque body" that Mikhail Bakhtin sees as characteristic of carnivalesque folk comedy, with its regenerative celebration of "lower-body" functions such as eating, defecation, sex, and birth (Bakhtin 1984: 318–70). However, they also reflect the ever-expanding, gobbling market of London, which in 1815 was already the world's largest city, but would by 1860 grow threefold to support a population of over three million people.

THE BODY OF OBJECTS

The composite subject who is made of objects became a feature of early nineteenth-century cartoon and comic writing. The poet and illustrator Thomas Hood (1799–1845), who wrote an ode to Grimaldi and was himself described as "the Grimaldi of literature," produced in 1834 a series of *Comic Composites for the Scrap Book*, where the faces of a "gardener," a "carpenter," an "artist," and other professionals are constructed from objects associated with that trade. Visual puns and verbal puns unite to suggest the materiality of the body and the ways in which people are constructed from and through the objects that they consume.

Hood's father was a bookseller-publisher in the City of London, so Hood was raised in the heart of a world of commerce. His poems and illustrations are knowingly metropolitan. They are highly aware that the modern world is made of material texts that advertise products. In his early etching *The Progress of Cant* (1825), the street is a collage of paper: posters plastered to every wall, people carrying placards, tracts trodden underfoot. Hood remarked that his own unsold poems were used to wrap butter: one form of printed matter, if unsuccessful, will rapidly turn into another. The human body is, in the modern city, equally liable to be turned into commodities. This is a dominant theme in Hood's work.

In “Mary’s Ghost: A Pathetic Ballad,” a comic poem of 1827, the specter of Mary comes to inform her lover, William, not only that she has died but that her corpse has been snatched for use in anatomical experiments by the medical profession:

O William dear! O William dear!
 My rest eternal ceases;
 Alas! My everlasting peace
 Is broken into pieces.
 . . .
 I vow’d that you should have my hand,
 But fate gives us denial;
 You’ll find it there, at Dr. Bell’s,
 In spirits and a phial.
 . . .
 I can’t tell where my head is gone,
 But Doctor Carpue can:
 As for my trunk, it’s all pack’d up
 To go by Pickford’s van.

—Hood 2000: 33–4

Hood’s poem is in part a parody of a traditional ballad known as “Sweet William’s Ghost,” where the dead lover returns from the grave to report that “My bones are buried in a kirk-yard/ Afar beyond the sea.”² In the folk ballad, Margaret is so afflicted by the news of William’s death and the impossibility of physical union with him that she pines away and dies. Hood, in a modern urban twist, relocates the drama to an anatomical environment where Mary’s head is unavailable for reunion because it has been taken to the laboratory of Joseph Carpue, a London surgeon who launched the modern era of plastic surgery by publishing an account in 1816 of how to perform a nose job. Dr. Charles Bell, who has Mary’s hand, was also a contemporary medical figure, most famous for his work on the nervous system. Hood’s material comedy “makes it real” by counterpointing the supposedly supernatural with the topical subject of dissection.

Anatomy in this period depended on a supply of fresh corpses, many of which were illicitly stolen and all of which belonged to the poor. “Mary’s Ghost” enjoys the awfulness of imagining a human “trunk” that has become the kind of container transported by house-moving firms. Pickford’s is still in the UK, a company well-known for removals. The nineteenth-century mass-market foreshadows our own. Puns, as everywhere in Hood’s work, image the concrete, at once mobile and unmoved nature of language. Words (peace/pieces) are like the body, in that they can be broken up, transported and sold on. They

proliferate. In his poetry and comic woodcuts, the insistent commodification of industrialized society is both celebrated and interrogated.

Hood wrote three blackly comic body-snatching poems. In “The Dead Robbery” (1837), the pauper Peter Bunce wakes in a graveyard to find that his suicide attempt has not been successful, but that his presumed corpse is being stolen by a body-snatcher. Bunce promptly knocks his assailant on the head and pops him in the sack, transforming the would-be trader into the very commodity Bunce himself was destined to become. Bunce goes on to sell dead bodies to medical doctors, but after receiving cash payment kills the doctors who are his would-be purchasers, transforming the anatomist into the stiff. The living “subject,” with its desires and aspirations, becomes, via Bunce’s remorseless economic logic, the anatomical “subject”: a skeleton and veinous structure ripe for deconstruction and study. Tellingly, Hood allows his protagonist to get away with his murders without punishment: Bunce lives until “four score” by “never troubling doctors any more.” This comic poem poses a serious question—is Bunce a sociopath? Or is it the coolly rational logic of the market that actuates and naturalizes this cold-blooded treatment of the human body?

Unstable, unresolved, excessive, freakish; a strange body made up of other bodies: the nineteenth-century city had a grotesque energy that expressed itself in creations that channeled its proliferating, hybrid, and contradictory character. Victor Hugo, in his 1827 preface to his play *Cromwell*, would declare that grotesque was the “new type,” comedy the “new form,” that characterized modern art (Hugo 1896: 34).

The various forms of “sketch” as descriptive comic prose, visual cartoon, and theatrical performance flourished in an expanding early nineteenth-century marketplace that favored periodicals and miscellanies. Thomas Hood, William Thackeray, and Charles Dickens all wrote for the theater and as journalists, and many other popular writers, such as Douglas Jerrold, Mark Lemon, and Theodore Hook, moved freely between stage and page. Hood’s *Comic Annual* (1830–42) had many imitators, including the illustrator George Cruikshank’s *Comic Almanack* (1835–53) and Henrietta Louisa Sheridan’s *Comic Offering or Ladies’ Melange of Literary Mirth* (1831–5), the first comic magazine to be edited, written, and illustrated by a woman. Sheridan’s cartoons, like Hood’s, often exploit visual-verbal puns that allow the viewer to see human subjects as objects or vice versa. For example, Sheridan’s “Dancing Pumps” shows not a pair of shoes but a pair of water pumps merrily jiggling in the street. Hood’s blacker comedy, meanwhile, is displayed in “Foot Soldiers” (1831), a cartoon in which two soldiers have had their arms blown off. The Napoleonic wars had been bloody, and amputees were a common sight on London streets in the 1820s and 1830s. Like Hood’s body-snatching poems, this woodcut explores the human body, through the body of language, as a material entity that can be cut up, reworked, and sold.

The nineteenth-century periodical, like the crowded urban street, made its readers acute viewers, rapidly assessing a plethora of sights, places, and

characters. In Richard Dighton's popular series *The Nuisances of London* (1830), readers are invited to laugh at urban confrontations. A gas-lamp lighter "accidentally" pours his product over an innocent bystander. A well-dressed woman has her clothes dirtied by a chimney sweep who brushes past her in the street. Middle-class citizens likely felt a mixture of indignation and hilarity viewing upper-class bodies being jostled and soiled by the physical work of tradesmen who served their economic needs. As with another comic miscellany, Robert Seymour's *Omnibus* (1830), which depicted social types that one might from 1829 meet in this new, socially mixed, mode of transport, the *Nuisances of London* makes comic capital out of unexpected cross-class encounter.

Dustmen, sweeps, and refuse collectors—marginal in earlier texts—become subjects in nineteenth-century comic songs and literature. "The Literary Dustman" is the autodidactic hero of a comic song of 1834. Another comic song of the 1830s, "The Royal Chummy," imagines a jovial sweep who drops into Buckingham Palace through the chimney (*The London Singer's Magazine* 1835–39: 34–5). Queen Victoria is absent, so he makes himself at home, leaving the bed smutty. Luckily, her Majesty is so entertained that she awards the sweep a knighthood. This song, which claims to be "founded in fact" is daringly comic in more than one way. "Sweeping" was a euphemism for having sex. We are implicitly invited to imagine The Royal Chummy and the Queen becoming very chummy indeed. In *The Facetious Songster* (1840), which proclaims itself "A Slap-up Collection of Favourite new Flash, Amatory and Comic Songs now singing at the Fake-away Clubs, Convivial Dinners, &c by all the Tip-top Swells," "The Chimney Sweeper" proclaims that:

There's sweeping above stairs, and sweeping below,
And the merchant he sweeps his maid Sally you know—
And Sal sweeps the clerk, and she tells him the fun,
And the clerk he tells madam, who sweeps in return.
Though I sweep to and fro, I'd have you to know,
We all love to sweep in the chimney below.

—*The Facetious Songster* 1840: 183–5

Sex and comic song can emphasize the pleasure in acknowledging our common parts and the cyclic nature of human intercourse. Laughter, here, temporarily liberates the body from the constraints of class, while simultaneously testing the rules that usually confine us to our particular social stratum.

THE SOCIAL BODY

Thackeray and Dickens began their careers as writers of comic sketches that drew attention to the variety of persons, of different classes and types, that one

might encounter in different settings, such as an omnibus, watching a public hanging, or at a children's party. Thackeray's exuberant *The Book of Snobs: By One of Themselves* (first published in *Punch* in 1846) subtly changed the English language. A "snob" had once been a cobbler; then a word used by undergraduates to denigrate those who were "townsmen" rather than "gownsmen." By the 1830s it was being used to describe vulgar and ostentatious members of the lower classes. But Thackeray, brilliantly, argues that we are *all* snobs: people desperately aware of our status and determinedly aping our superiors. This process starts early. In "The Court Circular and its Influence on Snobs," Thackeray relates that Miss Snobky is so self-conscious about her own appearance in the Court Circular that she realizes that her sudden departure from town will be a topic of conversation. "What will poor Claude Lollipop say when he hears of my absence?" she asks. Her confidante suggests that he may not hear. "My dear, he will read it in the papers," replies "the dear little fashionable rogue of seven years old." Thackeray continues:

Here is the account of Miss Snobky's dress, and that of her mother, Lady Snobky, from the papers:—

"MISS SNOBKY.

"Habit de Cour, composed of a yellow nankeen illusion dress over a slip of rich pea-green corduroy, trimmed en tablier, with bouquets of Brussels sprouts: the body and sleeves handsomely trimmed with calimanco, and festooned with a pink train and white radishes. Head-dress, carrots and lappets.

"LADY SNOBKY.

"Costume de Cour, composed of a train of the most superb Pekin bandannas, elegantly trimmed with spangles, tinfoil, and red-tape. Bodice and underdress of sky-blue velveteen, trimmed with bouffants and noeuds of bell-pulls. Stomacher a muffin. Head-dress a bird's nest, with a bird of paradise, over a rich brass knocker en ferronnière. This splendid costume, by Madame Crinoline, of Regent Street, was the object of universal admiration."

—Thackeray 1989: 20

Thackeray's comedy brilliantly conspires with the reader to lambaste the snobbery of British society, pitting us against "the would-be-genteel people . . . the silver-fork worshippers . . . and tattle-mongers, the grocers' ladies and tailors' ladies" who watch the absurd dress and doings of Lady Snobky with "universal admiration." Yet we are never exempt. When Thackeray tells us, his "beloved reader," that we have no chance of dining with the Emperor of China, he is, of course, correct—but the degree of familiarity he assumes is ominous. He knows that we, too, participate in the ogling, status-conscious, materialistic society we laugh at.

Thackeray's vegetable "illusion dress" is a second cousin to Grimaldi's vegetable man. It delights us with its absurd concoction of Brussels sprouts, carrots, and radishes paraded as the newest fashionable costume. It reminds us, as Hood's poems do, that humans can be consumables. The Snobkys are social "somebodies," but their bodies are mere theaters for the outrageous display of objects. Like bell-pulls and knockers, they deserve to be tugged and rapped to see if, beneath the facade, there is really anyone at home. Names also suggest that persons are trifles: Claude Lollipop (son of the Marquis of Sillabub) and Madame Crinoline are fancy accessories. The Snobkys are defined by their self-objectification as signifiers, rather than by their human essence.

In Thackeray's comic prose, all human life is a performance. This is inescapable. There is no stable human identity. Rather, we are all in the interesting position of signaling with our bodies according to social systems, which ordain that we should repress authentic physical impulses (insofar as we can identify these) in favor of playing the social game of one-upmanship. Thackeray, in his persona as author of *The Book of Snobs*, reflects:

Why the deuce should Mrs. Botibol blow me a kiss? I wouldn't kiss her for the world. Why do I grin when I see her, as if I was delighted? . . . Why, I say in a word, are we going on ogling and telegraphing each other in this insane way?—Because we are both performing the ceremonies demanded by the Great Snob Society; whose dictates we all of us obey.

Ogling and telegraphing may simultaneously make cultural sense and be "insane." Thackeray's works do not pretend to reliability; rather, they lay emphasis on the fictive nature of history, and of selfhood. His great novels *Barry Lyndon* (1844) and *Vanity Fair* (1848) image a world in which everyone is acting and gaming everyone else within a speculative market that encompasses all classes and professions from emperors to carpet-baggers, stock-jobbers to husband-hunters.

Dickens also cut his novelistic teeth in the magazine market for performative sketches of social type and social climbing. The first of his works to be published was "Mr. Minns and his Cousin" (1833): the story of a vain, tight-sphinctered bachelor of forty-eight who receives an unwelcome visit from his suburban cousin Octavius Budden. Budden is hoping that Minns will visit him in his cottage, just outside London, and will settle some of his tidy fortune upon his son.

Dickens is very particular about Minns's age, his address in Tavistock Street, about his income and occupation, and his clothes. We can picture his body in detail. Mr. Minns has a physical horror of both dogs and children, both of which offend his paramount desire for order. When his cousin Octavius appears, he brings a dog, with disastrous results. Budden remarks:

“But I say, Minns, when will you come down and see us? You will be delighted with the place; I know you will. Amelia and I were talking about you the other night, and Amelia said—another lump of sugar, please; thank ye—she said, don’t you think you could contrive, my dear, to say to Mr Minns, in a friendly way—come down, sir—damn the dog! He’s spoiling your curtains, Minns—ha!—ha!—ha!” Minns leaped from his seat as though he had received the discharge from a galvanic battery.

“Come out, sir!—go out, hoo!” cried poor Augustus, keeping, nevertheless, at a very respectful distance from the dog; having read of a case of hydrophobia in the paper of that morning. By dint of great exertion, much shouting, and a marvellous deal of poking under the tables with a stick and umbrella, the dog was at last dislodged, and placed on the landing outside the door, where he immediately commenced a most appalling howling; at the same time vehemently scratching the paint off the two nicely-varnished bottom panels, until they resembled the interior of a backgammon-board.

—Dickens 1996: 309–10

Dickens is a master of the theatrical scene in which, as here, unseen or partially seen action keeps the comic bodies on their toes. Mr. Minns’s galvanic leap is reminiscent of a dramatic stunt by Grimaldi, whose autobiography Dickens edited. The dog’s scratching, and the poking of Minns’s stick and umbrella, create a kind of comic fight scene in which the cousins, impotent to admit their real antipathy, engage in combat by proxy.

Budden’s dog is captured in prose whose precise construction and timing contrasts beautifully with the messy chaos of its rampage. These combined comic pleasures—of cool distance and precision in the writing with warmth and intimacy in the handling of character and situation—make Dickens’s writing designedly emotive in its appeal to the reader. We are invited to look with Minns’s fastidious eyes, yet laugh with Budden’s frank jollity. The Emperor Augustus was known as Octavius in his youth: a hint that perhaps these two cousins embody opposed but related manifestations of the same desire for social advancement—the one extroverted and unconscious of its effects, the other introverted and self-conscious to the point of desperation.

Dickens’s early novels contain many similarly enjoyable scenes of comic physical mayhem. In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), the vain and loquacious Mrs. Nickleby, the hero’s mother, is flattered by the attentions of the lunatic next door, who throws vegetables at her. Nothing that her sensible daughter, Kate, can say will persuade Mrs. Nickleby to withdraw inside and regard these attentions as insane. So eager is Mrs. Nickleby to preserve the dignity of having attracted a would-be lover that even cucumbers are welcome tributes.

. . . a shouting and scuffling noise, as of an elderly gentleman whooping, and kicking up his legs on loose gravel with great violence, was heard to proceed from the same direction as the former sounds; and, before they had subsided, a large cucumber was seen to shoot up in the air with the velocity of a skyrocket, whence it descended, tumbling over and over until it fell at Mrs. Nickleby's feet. This remarkable appearance was succeeded by another of a precisely similar description; then a fine vegetable marrow, of unusually large dimensions, was seen to whirl aloft, and come toppling down; then several cucumbers shot up together.

—Dickens 1978: 620

For a sexually aware reader, there is no mistaking this series of comic ejaculations. Comedy has ancient roots in seasonal vegetation and fertility rites: Thalia, the Greek goddess of comedy (from Greek *thaleia*, meaning “luxuriant, blooming,” and *thallos*, “green shoot, twig”) presides over a genre that points toward fruition (Bevis 2013: 11). That is why so many comedies, including *Nicholas Nickleby*, end in multiple marriages. Comedy, however, also frequently parodies ritual. Here, Dickens plays with an absurd vegetable courtship display that objectifies frustrated sexual desire in the human body. The mad neighbor with his “antics” behind the wall occupies a theatrical position similar to that of Budden's dog, enabling us to see what Mrs. Nickleby vainly tries to conceal: her desire for male attention, which has not diminished with her mature years. The scene also incorporates an affectionate parody of *Hamlet*. Tragedy is replayed as comedy.

Less obviously, when the madman shouts “Gog and Magog. Be mine, be mine!” he names the wooden effigies of giants which stood outside the Guildhall in London. These were traditional emblems of the City of London that had been carried in procession since the Renaissance. In Phiz's illustration to *Nicholas Nickleby*, the grinning madman behind his wall looks a little like a giant at the top of a beanstalk. He resembles both a figure from fairytale and from the contemporary iconography of London as a city full of material goods, the kind of magical figure who might well rain produce at one's feet.

Dickens's later novels use comedy to campaign against the dead hand of mechanization, coldly economic logic, suffocating bureaucracy, and overly systematized education that insists upon valuing facts and reason over imagination and feeling. In *Hard Times* (1854), Louisa Gradgrind is invited by her father to consider a marriage proposal by Mr. Bounderby, a middle-aged industrialist. Louisa is apathetic, unable to access any feelings about this union. She has been so mechanically trained that she embodies her father's pet theories. As he remarks, “You are not impulsive, you are not romantic, you are accustomed to view everything from the strong dispassionate ground of reason and calculation” (2008: 93).



FIGURE 5.2: “The Gentleman Next Door declares his Passion for Mrs. Nickleby” by “Phiz” (Hablot Knight Browne), *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839. Photo by DEA / A. DAGLI ORTI / Getty Images.

The Gradgrind children are automata; the damaged results of a de-naturing experiment. They are contrasted with Sissy Jupe, whose father “belongs to the horse-riding” at Sleary’s circus. Gradgrind, Sissy’s schoolteacher, is disgusted by her inability to define a horse in dictionary terms: “Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive.” The biting and grinding quality of such “education” embodies a violent desire to chew up the individual. Sissy, of course, knows horses differently—through physical contact and experience. Dickens instructs us to value this way of understanding living bodies: the circus stands for the human need for pleasure

and for love, repressed by a society intent on abstract calculation and material gain.

Dickens at his most allegorical is persuasive about the callousness of industrial society and its treatment of the human poor. But his delight in grotesquerie betrays his ambivalent fascination with the proliferation and confusion of people and objects, the consuming appetites of the Victorian city. In *Great Expectations* (1861), the finest and most haunting of Dickens's late novels, the threats of swallowing and of silencing are twinned. Pip, a young boy who will shortly be apprenticed to a local blacksmith, is terrified by a convict with a leg-iron who surprises him in a graveyard. Magwitch is a kind of ogre, who threatens to eat Pip if he fails to steal some food and a file and bring them to him. Pip is bound to Magwitch by physical guilt. That guilt flourishes in a more abstract form as the novel progresses. Pip wants to be a gentleman, and his wish is granted by a mysterious benefactor. But the agent of Pip's social rise is identical with the source of his primal loathing: Magwitch, who, having been transported for his crimes, has made a fortune in Australia. Pip's quest for gentility, to escape his low origins and remake his identity, turns into a nightmarish "return of the repressed," where freedom is a shackle and consumption is a gag. Even comic scenes, such as that in which Pip's pompous Uncle Pumblechook has his mouth stuffed with flowering annuals, speak of the violence and shame that complicate desire, the potentially stifling forces of growth and acquisition.

Community and the problematic quest to establish and maintain one's gentility are central to the mid-Victorian comic novel. Physical comedy in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853) is less boisterous than in the work of Dickens and Thackeray. It is replaced by acute, forensic observation of small-town networks and individual tales that connect to reveal the underside of a detailed social fabric whose stitching would be invisible to a more remote observer. The minuteness of scrutiny becomes part of the point, dramatizing as it does the littleness of much quotidian human experience, especially female experience, yet the manner in which unregarded lives underpin wider events and issues.

"Cranford is in possession of the Amazons," our insider narrator, Mary Smith, tells us: "all the holders of houses, above a certain rent, are women. If a married couple come to settle in the town, somehow the gentleman disappears" (1998: 3). One might be forgiven for thinking, on the basis of this introduction, that Cranford is a society of quiet murderesses. Or perhaps men, after an early version of reassignment surgery, emerge from the pantry *as* women? In fact, it turns out, men simply find excuses to stay away, with their regiment, their business, or their ship. This introduction, however, introduces a theme that will persist throughout Gaskell's ostensibly gentle comedy: women's power is, and isn't, a joke.

The female bodies in the novel are, in certain respects, guyed. Cranford ladies' dresses are "very independent of fashion." These ladies are frumpy and don't know, or don't care. Yet ironic humor and genuine respect can never be fully teased apart. The women live in "general but unacknowledged poverty" but insist on rules that maintain their status as genteel. They thus disdain all but wafer-thin bread and butter and sponge-biscuits at soirees. But when Miss Barker happens to offer a tea-tray "vulgarly loaded," they devour quantities of seed-cake "just to spare her feelings." Typical of many reported incidents in *Cranford*, this is both funny and moving. The novel is a masterpiece of examined repression.

Prominent among the stories is that of Miss Matty Jenkyns and her brother Peter. Both of these elderly characters have suffered from a pompous father, a Rector who "could hardly write a letter to his wife without cropping out into Latin," and a sister obsessed with the gravity of maintaining social caste. Peter, in his youth, was twice guilty of cross-dressing for a prank. The first time, he played a woman so enchanted with the Rector's writing that she visited seeking an autograph. This imposition, remarkably, passed undetected. On the second occasion, Peter impersonated his sister Deborah, pretending that she was nursing a baby: his father responded by publicly stripping and flogging him.

The reversion here from comedy to physical violence is abrupt. The Reverend Jenkyns is so outraged by the comic theater of Peter's transgendered body that he reframes the performance as a public spectacle of severe corporal punishment. The consequences are grave: Peter leaves home permanently and for a time is thought to have committed suicide. His mother's health never recovers. Becoming female, even in jest, carries a serious payload of pain. Gaskell deftly manages such abrupt emotional switchbacks. In another story within *Cranford*, Captain Brown is reading *The Pickwick Papers* at a railway station when he sees a child tumble onto the rails. He saves the child but is killed by the oncoming train. Comedy and tragedy collide.

Gaskell does not allow her readers to dismiss any character as solely comic. Miss Matty Jenkyns is a study in softness. She was, in her youth, bullied by her proud father and sister into rejecting the marriage proposal of a local farmer whom she loved. Yet Matty reveals herself as a woman of indomitable courage and honor when her finances are swallowed by a bank failure. Like the other "Amazons" of Cranford, she may be eccentric and, in certain ways, naïve. But under her comic multitude of caps, she maintains the humane values that allow the moral economy of the community to thrive. The ability of comedy, as Thackeray claimed, to "surprise you into compassion" is vital to the work *Cranford* observes and accomplishes.

Like Gaskell, Anthony Trollope in *Barchester Towers* (1857) depicts the community of a provincial town, observing its members' efforts to forge alliances, maintain gentility, and gain social prestige. We follow the power-

hungry machinations of Mr. Slope, the bishop's confidential chaplain, who sows discord and polarizes religious factions in Barchester. Trollope's fiction is, in certain regards, typical of mid-century realism—one of his finest novels is called *The Way We Live Now*. Yet it also acknowledges a debt to earlier, broader comic traditions. His names, like those of Sterne (Dr. Slop), Thackeray (Becky Sharp), and Dickens (Thomas Gradgrind), relate to the physical and mental qualities of his characters. Trollope's cast in *Barchester Towers* includes Mrs. Quiverful, Mrs. Bold, Mrs. Proudie, and Mr. Slope, who is introduced as tall, with a broad chest and wide shoulders to carry off his large feet and hands:

His hair is lank, and of a dull pale reddish hue. It is always formed into three straight lumpy masses, each brushed with admirable precision, and cemented with much grease . . . His face is nearly of the same colour as his hair, though perhaps a little redder: it is not unlike beef,—beef, however, one would say, of a bad quality. His forehead is capacious and high, but square and heavy, and unpleasantly shining . . . His nose, however, is his redeeming feature: it is pronounced straight and well-formed; though I myself should have liked it better did it not possess a somewhat spongy, porous appearance, as though it had been cleverly formed out of a red coloured cork. I never could endure to shake hands with Mr. Slope. A cold, clammy perspiration always exudes from him, the small drops are ever to be seen standing on his brow, and his friendly grasp is unpleasant.

—Trollope 1857: 47–8

Trollope vividly expresses in the body of Slope the truth of his character. It is coarse despite its apparent stature. He “shines” not with excellence but with sweat. His grasping efforts to ingratiate himself are contaminating. He is, in short, greasy. His vulgarity is emphasized by his body's similarity to commodities: fatty beef and wine. Redness hints at overindulgence and guilt. There is, one suspects, a deliberate further piece of embedded word-play here. This greasy villain is the proverbial “slippery slope”—one that is associated biblically with “the broad and easy way that leadeth to destruction” (Matt. 7:13). He will, in Barchester, have a rapid ascent and an equally rapid descent. He is, at the end of the tale, ejected from Barchester, but makes an advantageous marriage with the rich widow of a sugar-refiner. We are told that Slopes always find a way to live “off the fat of the land.”

Trollope's use of physical comedy is, like Gaskell's, relatively restrained. But we see in the association of negative physical and moral ideas around Slope a continuation of tropes familiar from allegory and theater that embody type in the shape, color, and habit of the body. Trollope is also fascinated by the way in which much can be conveyed in very small physical movements: the crook of a finger, a half-smile. Weakness and hypocrisy in the Bishop may be domestic and

minor and yet produce consequences regional in scope. *Barchester Towers* explores the relationship between the Church and secular forms of devotion—maternal baby-worship, romantic love. On the whole, the natural, instinctive claims of human love and the values of kindness and charity are preferred to the false austerity proposed by self-aggrandizing interpreters of religious doctrine such as Slope. The comic body, then, in this novel, suggests a form of intuitive wisdom that supersedes dogma: what we feel is true.

THE MORPHOLOGICAL BODY

Literature for children was a growth market in the nineteenth century: as books became more affordable and the general population more literate, the range of titles, formats, and types of illustration became increasingly imaginative and varied. Most early books aimed at young readers had been didactic. Victorian children's books—often bought for the Christmas holiday—competed to offer entertainment not only to children but to the adults who turned the pages. Often the body and its unruly capacity to grow, shrink, alter, and misbehave is part of the fun that these texts propose.

In Edward Lear's *Book of Nonsense* (1846, reissued 1863), each page discharges a limerick character, rather like a flip-book. Children were amazed and amused by the startling appearance of adults who behaved in extreme ways, acting on their physical impulses as children more often do. Thus, we are informed that:

There was an Old Person of Chili, whose conduct was painful and silly;
He sate on the stairs, eating apples and pears,
That imprudent Old Person of Chili.

—Lear 1863: 7

This Old Person's physical conduct may be "painful and silly" from a stern adult viewpoint that values decorum. But, if we value pleasure, then perhaps eating apples and pears on the stairs makes perfect sense. Lear's spontaneous illustrations project the willful oddity of his limerick characters into the generous space of the page. Their animation is key to their appeal. Critics often compared the style to that which a "clever child" might produce. Lear's work fuses aspects of Old Person and child, allowing children to shriek with laughter at the antics of elders who ought to know better and, equally, adults to acknowledge the persistence of a child-self in their physical and psychological desires.

Many of Lear's nonsense characters have extraordinary bodies: noses that carry a lamp for night fishing; chins that play the harp; beards in which birds can nest. Lear plays on the way in which text and image are equally susceptible

to doodling and punning: “beard” does contain the essence of “bird.” People can be “elastic” (flexible) but are not normally coiled up like a rubber hose, as the Old Person of Pinner is. They can “lose their head” but do not normally do so like the Young Person of Janina, whose smiling head becomes detached when her uncle overactively fans it into a state of levitation. Lear celebrates the energetic instability of the body, its refusal to be repressed.

Many of his nonsense persons in his later works are consorting with animals. Some are unwisely attempting to educate wild creatures, like the Old Lady of France, who tries to teach ducklings to dance. Others are caught in mirror-pose, reflecting (on) a bird, animal, or insect who uncannily resembles themselves. “How alike do we look?” might be the question this nonsense poses. It is a question with profound implications. The comic consideration of comparative morphology also touches on the matter of comparative perspective and subjectivity. A nonsense character might both “look like” (resemble) a parrot and “look like” one (see the world in a similar way). Are people just a type of animal: no different in essence from birds and beasts? And if this is so, are the trappings of “civilization,” such as dress, as foolish as they would be for kangaroos and fishes?

Lear was in early life a natural history illustrator whose work was known to Charles Darwin: his careful observation played an active role in the scientific identification and classification of new species. His “nonsense” poems and drawings also play with categorization and potential hybridization between kinds of creature. He imagines an Owl and the Pussy-cat falling in love, marrying, then (in a blackly comic sequel) producing offspring who are “partly little beasts and partly little fowls.” The “Scroobious Pip” is neither a beast, a bird, an insect, or a fish, but hovers proudly between these categories. In Lear’s playful “nonsense botany,” imaginary new species like *Queeriflora Babyöides* and *Pollybirdia Singularis* combine visual features of plants with those of animal life. Lear was aware of new biological work on zoophytes, which do combine animal and vegetable characteristics. His “nonsense” has a scientific dimension. It often explores the attraction of involution, or returning to simpler forms of life—a Darwinian possibility that also reflects a Romantic wistfulness about childhood as a state of greater imaginative and physical freedom.

Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* (1865), though very different in style and tone, is also fascinated by the morphological body. Writing a letter to a child friend, Florence Balfour (“Birdie”), Carroll expressed both wonder and a degree of horror at the way in which children grow up:

As are the feelings of the old lady who, after feeding her canary and going out for a walk, finds the cage entirely filled, on her return, with a live turkey—or of the old gentleman who, after chaining up a small terrier overnight, finds a hippopotamus raging around the kennel in the morning—such are my

feelings when, trying to recall the memory of a small child . . . at Sandown, I meet with the astonishing photograph of the same microcosm suddenly expanded into a tall young person, whom I should be too shy to look at, even with a telescope which would no doubt be necessary to . . . satisfy myself whether she has eyebrows or not!

—Carroll 1980: 117

The change from child to adult body is here compared with a species transformation; its variation in scale requires optical instruments to negotiate—the idea of distance in time is expressed in exaggerated spatial terms. The transformation is comic. But it is also alarming. “Birdie” has literally grown beyond recognition.

Alice in Wonderland will undergo similar transformations. Tumbling down a rabbit-hole, she finds that she is too large to get through a door that leads temptingly to bright flowers and cool fountains. She wishes “I could shut up like a telescope.” Testing a bottle labelled “DRINK ME” and nibbling a cake labelled “EAT ME,” she finds that she *can* shrink and grow just as she pleases. The other peculiar creatures of Wonderland will find Alice hard to identify; the



FIGURE 5.3: John Tenniel, illustration of Alice transforming into a long-necked creature from the 1890 edition of *Alice in Wonderland*. Photo by Universal History Archive / Getty Images.

Pigeon accuses her of being a serpent and when the Caterpillar asks her who she is, she responds doubtfully, “I know who I *was* when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.” Carroll’s nonsense explores the dreamlike strangeness of childhood, its combination of freedom and frustrating impotence, and the seismic shifts in self-perception incumbent on “growing up”: like Alice, we all are assumed to retain some continuity of identity while our body expands and contracts. But the process is queerer and more troubling than we are generally willing to own.

The most provocative aspect of Carroll’s *Wonderland* is that Alice, a child, is the most rational creature in it. The adults are illogical, rude, selfish, easily distracted, and sometimes violent. The Red Queen throws tantrums like a toddler:

The Queen turned crimson with fury, and, after glaring at her for a moment like a wild beast, began screaming “Off with her head! Off with—”

“Nonsense!” said Alice, very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent.

—Carroll 1998: 72

The genre of “nonsense,” then—like the many odd creatures within it—explores the morphological boundaries of its own putative category. If Alice can rightly accuse the ruling figure in her own novel of behaving nonsensically, then perhaps the child’s viewpoint on adult rules in Victorian society is fairer and more objective than adults’ prevailing view of children.

This is also the theme of *Vice Versa: A Lesson for Fathers* (1882), an unjustly neglected Victorian comic novel, which amused both Lear and Carroll. It opens with Paul Bultitude, a Colonial Produce Merchant, sitting alone after dinner in late January 1881, in a state of uneasy anticipation. He is waiting for his son Dick to say goodbye, prior to returning to boarding school after the Christmas holidays. Bultitude is a prosperous man but a widower and an uneasy father of three children: he doesn’t know how to handle them and resorts to platitudes, threats, and absence from the nursery. In short, he “sat on brambles until he had seen the house definitely rid of his son’s presence.”

Dick is evidently miserable at Grimstone’s school and asks to be removed from it at the end of the term. He petitions his father for money and to allow him to take a small Garudâ stone that his uncle Marmaduke brought from India. Bultitude rejects his son’s requests and, clutching the stone—which happens to be a magical artifact—decides to impart some fatherly wisdom on the well-worn theme of childhood being the happiest time of one’s life:

He sank back into his chair and put the tips of his fingers together, smiling with a tolerant superiority.

“Perhaps you will believe me,” he said impressively, “when I tell you, old as I am and much as you envy me, I only wish, at this very moment, I could be a boy again, like you. Going back to school wouldn’t make me unhappy, I can tell you.”

...

As he spoke these unlucky words, he felt a slight shiver, followed by a curious shrinking sensation all over him. It was odd, too, but the arm-chair in which he sat seemed to have grown so much bigger all at once. He felt a passing surprise, but concluded it must be fancy, and went on as comfortably as before.

“I should like it, my boy, but what’s the good of wishing? I only mention it to prove that I was not speaking at random. I’m an old man and you’re a young boy, and, that being so, why, of course—What the dooce are you giggling about?”

—Anstey 1911: 22

Of course, the wishing stone has had its effect. Paul Bultitude has shrunk to the size of his son. In vain, he tries to assert his parental “tolerant superiority” while occupying the body of a thirteen-year-old. Dick seizes the Garudâ stone and wishes to be his father’s age. So Dick (whom everyone takes for Paul Bultitude) ends up sending his father back to school, where his pompous parent will re-learn just how miserable it is possible for a schoolboy to be. Bultitude is bullied by other boys, punished by the masters, and generally disliked; he eats horrible food; and nobody will listen to him when he tries to tell the truth.

Dick, remaining at home to run his father’s business, will gain a greater appreciation of the complicated responsibilities that adulthood involves. But, as Anstey’s title conveys, the really important lesson here is for fathers. Bultitude, who has a portly “bow-window” figure and whose name suggests bulk and aggregation, shrinks quite literally when he is revealed as a hypocrite. His “superiority” is false. His inner self is just as vulnerable as his son’s. He is forced to confront childhood, not as a concept—distanced by time and by conventional rhetoric—but as a seething, present consciousness. Eventually, he runs away from school and back to his own house, where a party is in progress. Nightmarishly convinced that he is stuck in his son’s body forever, he rushes to the top of the house, considering flinging himself from the roof. But in climbing the nursery steps, Bultitude encounters his youngest son Roly, who has picked up the Garudâ stone and is willing to exchange it for a sugar plum. Importantly, it is the infant—with his uncomplicated, pre-sexual appetite—who is able to wish his father and teenage brother back to their former states, releasing them from the physical exchange of bodies that crystallized their power struggle. Bultitude, restored to his adult frame, reforms emotionally, becoming a better, kinder parent.

THE GENDERED BODY

In late-Victorian comedy, the authority of the Victorian businessman and paterfamilias is comprehensively undermined. Charles Pooter, in George and Weedon Grossmith's delightful *Diary of a Nobody* (serialized in *Punch* in 1888), is Head Clerk in a city firm and lives in a six-room house in Holloway with his wife Carrie and unruly son, Lupin. Pooter is funny because his complacent sense of his own importance is persistently belied by the utterly unremarkable nature of his existence. He no more requires a memoir than a flea requires a tombstone. Yet he maintains a grave dignity even as he confides his absurd, accident-prone life. In one diary entry, Pooter records that he painted the bath red, much to his wife's disgust. The following day, he wakes up with a "fearful headache," which she ascribes to paint-fumes but he insists is a cold: "I told her firmly that I knew a great deal better what was the matter with me than she did." Pooter decides to take a hot bath to dispel his symptoms:

On moving my hand above the surface of the water, I experienced the greatest fright I ever received in the whole course of my life; for imagine my horror on discovering my hand, as I thought, full of blood. My first thought was that I had ruptured an artery, and was bleeding to death, and should be discovered, later on, looking like a second Marat, as I remember seeing him in Madame Tussaud's. My second thought was to ring the bell, but remembered there was no bell to ring. My third was, that there was nothing but the enamel paint, which had dissolved with boiling water. I stepped out of the bath, perfectly red all over, resembling the Red Indians I have seen depicted at an East-End theatre. I determined not to say a word to Carrie, but to tell Farmerson to come on Monday and paint the bath white.

—Grossmith and Grossmith 2008: 22

Pooter's anxious body here is dyed red: the color of embarrassment. The red paint also evokes the menstrual blood that a woman might exude. Convinced of the drama of his own existence, Pooter at first imagines himself, like the French revolutionary Marat, murdered in the bath. His second thought is to demand help from a servant, but he is unable to ring. His final, alienated position is that of a theatrical exhibit. He will have to conceal his folly. Sensible Carrie, the maid Sarah, and his flowery son Lupin all have Pooter on the back foot. His impotence is legendary.

As women in the last decades of the nineteenth century took up new educational and work opportunities and benefited from legislation that gave them new rights within marriage, the possible fluidity of gender roles became a topic of theatrical comedy. The gendered body—its apparent and actual identity, its sexual desires, its social behavior—was a more openly contested space than

ever before. Court cases such as that of the transvestite couple Boulton and Park, who were in 1870 accused, but later acquitted, of homosexual acts, also brought to public attention the behavior of men who chose to go about “in drag.”

This context gave Brandon Thomas’s *Charley’s Aunt*, the theatrical smash hit of 1892, a riskiness and friskiness that established it at once as a play that “became a craze”: “for the next two years there was never an empty seat” (Brandon-Thomas 1955: 179–80). The premise of this three-act farcical comedy is that two Oxford undergraduates, Jack Chesney and Charley Wykeham, are hoping to invite their respective sweethearts for lunch in their college rooms, with the intention of proposing to them. This can only be done with propriety if there is an older female present. Charley’s aunt, Donna Lucia d’Alvadorez, a wealthy benefactress whom he has never before met, is expected that day from Brazil. When she fails to appear, Jack and Charley persuade a fellow undergraduate, Lord Fancourt Babberley, to don women’s clothes and impersonate her.



FIGURE 5.4: Actor William Sydney Penley in drag as Charley’s Aunt in 1892. Photo © Hulton-Deutsch Collection / CORBIS / Corbis via Getty Images.

Fanny Babbs passes as “Charley’s Aunt,” yet “her” behavior displays a physical boldness that calls into question what an independent, middle-aged woman may and may not do in public. She smokes a cigar. She swears. She crosses the room with “long strides” and “punches the cushion—vigorously.” She both flirts with the men and kisses the young women. One of the lines that cracked up Victorian audiences was the aunt’s coy assertion, “Oh what devils we women are!”

More outrageously, the play glances at the possibility of men being attracted to men. Donna Lucia is a millionaire. Both Jack’s father and Amy’s father make a play for “her” hand, apparently unaware that they are proposing to a young man. Sir Francis Chesney makes a perfect fool of himself in declaring his affections, suggesting that he is like a lonely traveler coming across a “bright little floweret . . . by the wayside” and asking his intended: “do you know what a man longs for when he’s lonely—desolate—and wretched?” To which the “aunt” mischievously responds, “A drink?” (Thomas 1935: 57). Heteronormative order is restored at the end of the play, when the real Donna Lucia appears and is united with Sir Francis, and Lord Fancourt is paired off with Ela, her ward. But the feminine nickname “Fanny Babbs” belies the play’s pious stage instruction that Lord Fancourt has “never acted in his life before or worn women’s clothes.” Accidental cross-dressing here enables recognition of a truth in the form of a disguise. Male and female bodies, and desires, can and do escape the limitations prescribed by polite society.

Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), while far wittier in its epigrammatic sallies, bears a family resemblance to *Charley’s Aunt*. It also deals with two young men (Jack and Algy) who have to outwit Algy’s formidable aunt, Lady Bracknell, in order to be united with their chosen fiancées. It seems no coincidence that Lady Bracknell is frequently played by a man in women’s clothes.

Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff are, like Brandon Thomas’s Jack and Charley, apparently heterosexual young men. Yet they admit to double lives, where Jack is honest Jack in the country but libertine Ernest in town, while Algy visits an imaginary friend “Bunbury” in the country in order to escape dull social obligations in town: he will soon be impersonating “Ernest” on illicit visits to court Jack’s ward, Cecily. Mistaken and assumed identities are common in farce. But in Wilde’s work they explicitly allude to a wider social theater in which pretense is ubiquitous. Many Victorians were indeed leading double lives: heterosexual, homosexual, or, like Wilde himself, bisexual. Wilde interrogates and celebrates a society of flagrant duplicity, where the name Ernest is adored by both the ladies Jack and Algy are wooing, who are ignorant that it is not the real identity of either man. Given a vicar willing to re-christen them, however, that superficial problem can be fixed. Wilde’s anti-didactic and anti-realist theater dares to value aesthetics over morality and artifice over an

essentialist view of physical identity. Hearing about the pleasure-loving, widowed Lady Harbury, Algernon remarks: "I hear her hair has gone quite gold from grief." The natural response of the body to death is dyeing.

THE MODERN BODY

The advent of the twentieth century is often viewed as a watershed moment in artistic production: cinema begins to be the definitive modern form, new technology (the car, the airplane, the telephone and telegraph) shapes the mass experience of bodies that are both ever in motion and atomized in communication. Duncan Grant's experimental mural "Bathing" (1911) is characteristic of its era: it depicts seven male swimmers as they curve through space, from the moment of diving to that of hauling themselves into a boat. Or it may, in fact, be only one swimmer who is caught, as if in successive frames of a movie camera, his body-in-motion a wave amongst waves. The face of the swimmer(s) is turned away; individual identity is less significant than admiration of the body's muscular mechanics.

Yet in theater, fiction, and cartoon often what is most apparent in the comic tradition is continuity. Oscar Wilde's wit was formative for figures such as Max Beerbohm, a gifted caricature artist, journalist, and novelist. In *Zuleika Dobson* (1911), he imagines a femme fatale whose rejection causes all the male undergraduates in Oxford to commit suicide. This is an outrageous novel. Like *The Importance of Being Earnest*, it is partly a spoof of Victorian literary conventions. Beerbohm draws attention to the absurdity of techniques such as omniscient narration in "realist" fiction. His plot is defiantly improbable. The pleasure of the text lies in the seductions of language and the comic exploration of narcissism in all the characters. When Zuleika arrives in Oxford, the body of the train and of its beautiful occupant are suggestively combined:

Came a whistle from the distance. The breast of an engine was descried, and a long train curving after it, under a flight of smoke. It grew and grew. Louder and louder, its noise foreran it. It became a furious, enormous monster, and, with an instinct for safety, all men receded from the platform's margin. (Yet came there with it, unknown to them, a danger far more terrible than itself.) Into the station it came blustering, with cloud and clangour. Ere it had yet stopped, the door of one carriage flew open, and from it, in a white travelling-dress, in a toque a-twinkle with fine diamonds, a lithe and radiant creature slipped nimbly down to the platform.

—Beerbohm 1922: 1–2

Zuleika is a monster who, like a runaway train, will cut a swathe through Oxford's male population. But Oxford deserves her. She is a vision of its own

aesthetic self-worship. Beerbohm is critical of “manliness,” a conception of masculine virility based on physical prowess, complacent nationalism, and heroic sacrifice. When the Duke of Dorset leads all the male students to plunge, lemming-like, into the river, he does so in deference to what he knows to be a false ideal; Dorset cannot, however, change his mind. Death is preferable to dishonor. Beerbohm’s comic novel is Wildean; it is also modernist. Like Duncan Grant’s “Bathing,” it admires the sexual power of the body as an objective phenomenon. Its cheerful depiction of mass suicide eerily anticipates the emptying of Oxford colleges of young men effected by the First World War. Both Virginia Woolf and Evelyn Waugh, who called Beerbohm “the Master,” were influenced by his use of comic irony.

The comic novelist P. G. Wodehouse, who began his career writing stage musicals, was influenced by F. Anstey and by W. S. Gilbert. His idle and feckless but lovable character Bertie Wooster and his butler Jeeves, who first appear in 1915, recall Wilde’s Algernon Moncrieff and his sardonic butler, Lane. Bertie will also spend much of the comic action avoiding terrifying aunts. Marriage and procreation spell the end of such comedy. Bertie’s physical discomfiture and constant scrapes usually involve an escape from the threat of romantic engagement. He is never obliged to grow up, to be bound in marriage, or to father offspring; he is to be preserved in the delightful state of irresponsibility for which we value him. Bertie is, in this sense, a physical embodiment of the freedom of the comic spirit.

Early twentieth-century film also inherits the legacy of Victorian comedy. Fred Evans, “Pimple” in a series of early silent films, came from a family who had starred in Sanger’s circus; his grandfather had played the Clown in harlequinades. Charlie Chaplin, too, trained in the British music halls, developing the physical skills of pratfalling, dancing, and performing stunts with elaborate machinery, but equally a sentimental pathos of expression traditional to the role of Clown in pantomime. His small body (that of child and adult combined) conveys delight, wonder, puzzlement, terror, and the artless cunning of the “little man” perpetually dealing with social forces that oppress him. Indeed, even a late Chaplin film such as *Modern Times* (1936) contains many motifs common to Grimaldi’s routines. *Modern Times* is shaped by the Great Depression: it examines the way in which an industrial system denatures the individual body; unemployment; strikes, political protest, and police harassment. But Chaplin’s silent mime of being forced to eat improbable objects; the accusations of criminality from which he has to escape in chase scenes; his “nonsense song”; and even the machine that threatens to swallow the humans who tend it: all these have traditional antecedents on the Victorian stage.

In 1927, Wyndham Lewis reflected that “the root of the Comic is to be sought in the sensations resulting from the observations of a *thing* behaving like a person. But from that point of view all men are necessarily comic: for they are



FIGURE 5.5: Charlie Chaplin caught as a human cog in a vast machine in *Modern Times*, 1936. Photo by Bettmann / Getty Images.

all *things*, or physical bodies, behaving as *persons*” (Lewis 1928: 247). The body in comedy, from 1800 to 1920, is often a vehicle for exploring serious subjects: the remorseless economic logic of consumption in an urbanized world; the relentless performance of social class; the pressure that adult “rationality” exerts on the physicality of the child-self. But the power of comedy also lies in temporary escape. It promises a holiday from the normal limitations on our physical identity that may, just possibly, offer—as it does to Peter Bunce in “The Dead Robbery” or Paul Bultitude in *Vice Versa*—the chance of a new beginning.

CHAPTER SIX

Politics and Power

Nineteenth-Century American Humor

GREGG CAMFIELD

THE CARPET-BAG

In Chapter XIII of *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), Mark Twain describes how he and his party of American tourists were tricked by a Parisian guide. In a parting barb, Twain wrote, “I shall visit Paris again someday, and then let the guides beware! I shall go in my war paint—I shall carry my tomahawk along” (1984a: 99). True Williams, the artist commissioned to ornament the first edition, envisioned Twain’s return trip in the image below. Note that Williams does *not* add war-paint to Twain’s iconic visage. Instead, he puts Twain in an amalgam of clothing to suggest Twain’s hybridity: a dress coat and collar under a western slouch hat combined with buckskin leggings, breech-clout, twiggy feathers in the hat, and a bow and arrows to accompany the tomahawk. To signify that Twain is traveling, he carries in his left hand a carpet bag emblazoned with the initials M.T./U.S., suggesting not that Mark Twain is an American but that Mark Twain is *the* American, the type, the pattern, the quintessential. Given that Twain expressed antipathy toward Native Americans for almost the entire length of his professional career, this is an extraordinary piece of cultural appropriation that speaks powerfully to the richly complex dynamic of humor in the Age of Empire. This dynamic unfolds with great clarity and importance in the American experience because the US was both the first post-colonial nation of the modern era and one of the most aggressive European imperial states. The way in which the US defined itself both against European politics



FIGURE 6.1: True Williams, “Return in War-Paint,” in Mark Twain’s *The Innocents Abroad*, 1869. American Publishing Company, Hartford, CT, p. 124, courtesy of Matthew Kaiser.

and culture at the same time that it pushed European ways on non-European cultures by itself created the kinds of cognitive dissonance that fuels humor. Moreover, the shift in the English-speaking New World from cultural interplay with the indigenous world marked by transculturation to one that forced assimilation allows us to trace through humor the ways that cross-cultural impacts of different kinds influence the discourse by which a state defines itself.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the United States was still struggling to craft its identity as a post-colonial nation while simultaneously grappling with its role among nations. At issue were fundamental renegotiations of power, internally as a matter of individual status *vis-à-vis* traditional hierarchies, and externally, between itself and the original nations to the west and the colonizing nations across the Atlantic. In a nation that was founded around abstract ideas of freedom and personhood, matters of how it would deal with slaves, servants, the uneducated, members of various religious sects, indigenous peoples, social class hierarchies, property and taxation as determinants of power, imperialism, and community were open questions, vigorously debated in every public forum. In this stressful context, partisans of every stripe used humor as one of many tools to advocate for various positions

and to attack others. Americans used humor in conventional ways, appropriating both the ancient Western traditions of satire, based on the idea that laughter is a form of aggression and social coercion, and the more recent Western tradition of amiable humor, predicated on liberal philosophies and used as a way to ameliorate social tensions and to promote tolerance. Furthermore, in pushing the boundaries of traditional humor, American practitioners explored various kinds of folk humor, borrowing not only from European, but also from African- and Native-American traditions. The resulting *mélange* pushed humor beyond its conventionally understood roles of either policing the bounds of acceptable behavior or promoting tolerance of different kinds of behavior and being. In some cases, it became a mode of exploration, a way to investigate paradox without advocacy, a technique for describing and to some degree driving the cultural changes that were coming about regardless of conscious intentions or ideology.

LOOMINGS

The illustration of a beaver in the center of a state seal may be the most poignant of early American jokes. Elevating a commodity to the center of a seal violated symbolic norms. Indeed, one early image of a proposed colonial seal with two



FIGURE 6.2: Seal of New Netherland, c. 1650. Wikimedia Commons.

beavers replacing the rampant lions in the official Dutch seal was not adopted, probably because it took the replacement of monarchy by capitalism too far. While this one, eventually adopted, has the beaver under the crown and not rampant, it nonetheless is not couchant, either, and it certainly holds sway in the center of the insignia. As amusing, and prescient, as this substitution proved to be, it was also true. The colonists were far removed from the oversight of feudal lords; the Netherlands was in the process of creating modern capitalism, and the fur trade provided the economic basis for the settling of what is now Canada and the northeast of the United States. This trade relied almost exclusively on trade with the indigenous peoples of the area. The poignancy of this comic image comes from the fact that the trade proved ruinous to the native animals and peoples.

What we don't know is if the creator of this seal laughed. It may have been an entirely serious effort to celebrate what was important to the colonial adventurers, and the comic juxtaposition may jump out at us merely in retrospect. It may, however, have been a discovery, through comic juxtaposition, of not just a new enterprise in a New World, but a new way of thinking. All that remains is the structure, the radical juxtaposition between two cultural registers—feudalism and trade—that were, by custom, separated on a rigid hierarchy. We know that those high in status in a feudal system were very touchy about their position, insisting on deference, which they policed on a regular basis through condescending wit and through physical power. Is this image an effort to turn the tables, to use economic power as the basis for a different society, or is it a serious effort to borrow power through a legitimate use of traditional symbolism?

There are other early jokes by European colonists that we know to be intended, and these fit the traditional mold; they were intended to substitute European power for native traditions by belittling the natives. The most common of these is the celebration of an often-told, usually mythical con-game, namely, that the natives were fooled into selling their valuables for next to nothing:

These poor people at first approached the English with great caution, having heard much of the treachery of the Spaniards, and not knowing but these strangers might be as treacherous as they. But, at length, discovering a kind of good nature in their looks, they ventured to draw near, and barter their skins and furs for the bawbles and trinkets of the English.

—Byrd 1841: 1

The most extravagant and most frequently retold version of this joke is that natives sold Manhattan to Peter Minuit for twenty-four dollars of trinkets, a joke that obscures the real balance between the native peoples and the European

colonists. Throughout the northeast quadrant of North America, European incursions succeeded only through reciprocal trade with native peoples. Europeans traded very useful steel for merely ornamental beaver skins, which, in the opinion of most indigenous peoples, was a sign that the joke was on the Europeans. Indeed, as will be discussed below, native cultures had rich traditions of comedy from which Europeans borrowed heavily; maize was not the only kind of corn Europeans appropriated.

Trade and relations with Native Americans were at the root of the rupture between Great Britain and the thirteen colonies that became the United States. The degree to which the British government supported mercantilist policies over reciprocal and free trade is the story most often told of why the colonies rebelled. Duties on imported goods and restrictions on home manufactures certainly outraged colonists. But just as significant a source of rebellious attitudes was the Crown's policy toward native peoples. The British government saw no reason not to continue the policy that successfully led to the colonization of the New World, namely, the selective use of native nations as allies to secure larger policy goals. From the earliest days, colonists built alliances with some native tribes who were at war with others; the alliances came with land and trade rights that ultimately were at least as damaging to the allies as to the opponents. In its centuries-long war with France for European leadership, England conquered the French colonies in the New World with the help of many native allies. In exchange, the Crown agreed to restrict continued colonization across the Alleghenies. This restriction was as untenable to many colonists on the western edges of the middle colonies as the trade restrictions were to the shipping interests of New England.

The confluence of these concerns appears in some of the earliest examples of American humor, most notably in the writings of two of the most prominent colonial figures who used comic writing to further political ends: Benjamin Franklin and William Byrd. Both were fully invested in the colonial project—Byrd as a colonial subject trying to establish the norms of gentility in what he saw as a barbarous outpost, tainted more by the behavior of lower-class Europeans than of the natives, and Franklin as one of the most important Revolutionaries who may well be credited with the anti-feudal attitudes that were to become the central contested ground of American political humor of the nineteenth century. For both men, traditional modes of satire shaped their rhetoric, though Franklin was beginning to experiment with new ideas of humor that were developed early in the eighteenth century, most notably by Francis Hutcheson.

The establishment of boundaries of many kinds is a prominent theme in Byrd's writing, most notably in *The History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, which, though written around 1728, was not published until 1841. Styling himself a gentleman, Byrd used the old-style genteel

approach of privately circulating his thoughts in manuscript in his lifetime. This private circulation bolstered, in his mind, his class standing, creating a barrier of literacy and literary tradition between himself and the commoners, especially those from North Carolina.

Byrd is a traditional satirist, in that he critiques behavior that violates his “civilized” norms of respect, decorum, industry, and High-Church Anglicanism. His puns and allusions reinforce those norms, as in this mockery of the democratic process of counting “ayes” and “nays” when making decisions:

The only business here is raising of hogs, which is managed with the least trouble, and affords the diet they are most fond of. The truth of it is, the inhabitants of North Carolina devour so much swine’s flesh, that it fills them full of gross humours . . . Whenever a severe cold happens to constitutions thus vitiated, it is apt to improve into the yaws, called there very justly the country distemper. This has all the symptoms of *syphilis*, with this aggravation, that no preparation of mercury will touch it. First it seizes the throat, next the palate, and lastly shows its spite to the poor nose, of which it is apt in a small time treacherously to undermine the foundation. This calamity is so common and familiar here, that it ceases to be a scandal, and in the disputes that happen about beauty, the noses have in some companies much ado to carry it. Nay, it is said that once, after three good pork years, a motion had like to have been made in the house of burgesses, that a man with a nose should be incapable of holding any place of profit in the province.

—Byrd 1841: 16

Byrd does not see the state of nature as one of innocence or beauty, but rather barbarism. Yet that does not translate into a denigration of native peoples. On the contrary, Byrd for the most part accords them respect as members of other nations, nations that need to be treated appropriately in order for the colonial project to succeed. He prefaced his stinging mockery of North Carolinians with a sweeping account of the settlement of the British colonies in North America, lamenting the treatment of the natives:

They had now made peace with the Indians, but there was one thing wanting to make that peace lasting. The natives could, by no means, persuade themselves that the English were heartily their friends, so long as they disdained to intermarry with them. And, in earnest, had the English consulted their own security and the good of the colony—had they intended either to civilize or convert these gentiles, they would have brought their stomachs to embrace this prudent alliance.

The Indians are generally tall and well-proportioned, which may make full amends for the darkness of their complexions. Add to this, that they are

healthy and strong, with constitutions untainted by lewdness, and not enfeebled by luxury. Besides, morals and all considered, I cannot think the Indians were much greater heathens than the first adventurers, who, had they been good Christians, would have had the charity to take this only method of converting the natives to Christianity. For, after all that can be said, a sprightly lover is the most prevailing missionary that can be sent amongst these, or any other infidels.

Besides, the poor Indians would have had less reason to complain that the English took away their land, if they had received it by way of portion with their daughters. Had such affinities been contracted in the beginning, how much bloodshed had been prevented, and how populous would the country have been, and, consequently, how considerable? Nor would the shade of the skin have been any reproach at this day; for if a Moor may be washed white in three generations, surely an Indian might have been blanched in two.

—1841: 3

This early part of *The History* sets the tone for the rest, articulating a real-politic based on traditional feudal alliances even as it articulates a racial hierarchy. The fact that the manuscript merely circulated among the elite friends of Byrd completely fits the worldview: one of traditional feudal rank justified by birth, land, and policy. The sarcastic humor of the entire work uses scorn—the traditional marker of humor as a social corrective—to establish Byrd's position and credentials as an educated man of the upper class. The cavalier mindset he articulated fed one of the dominant strands of humorous writing throughout the American nineteenth century.

Franklin, too, is best known for a work that he first composed for private consumption—his autobiography. The tone there shares some of Byrd's sarcastic contempt for those below him, but his standards for hierarchy are completely different. To Franklin, natural abilities assiduously cultivated were the only legitimate markers of superiority; his ironic judgments focus on failings irrespective of social class. Indeed, he even mocks himself whenever he finds himself putting on airs. To a large degree, Franklin's satire shares much with Byrd's, using mockery as a social corrective. But while Byrd almost never uses vernacular, and when he does, only to mock the way that vernacular distorts the King's English, Franklin often used vernacular. Younger than Byrd, Franklin was influenced by the eighteenth-century debate about humor between those who defended the Classical idea that comic wit was best used as a social corrective and those who saw it as a social palliative. The latter, led most effectively by Francis Hutcheson, advocated an amiable humor that enabled people not just to tolerate, but even to admire, difference.

It may seem surprising, but our current use of the term "humor" as in "sense of humor" as a valuable personal attribute, was intentionally created to buttress

a political argument. The ancient idea that one's temperament was a by-product of four bodily humors depended on the idea that health was a balance between choler, bile, blood, and phlegm. Moods were considered to be governed by these humors, and temperaments arose from slight imbalances. We still use the terms "sanguine" (from the French word for blood), "choleric," and "phlegmatic" to describe optimistic, combative, and dull personalities. In this humoral theory, an imbalance was a sickness, and most medical practice—such as blood-letting, was believed to rebalance the humors. Humorous behavior was, by definition, both sick and odd, and therefore worthy of treatment and ridicule. So the association of "humor" with "laughable" is ancient, but the idea that a "humorist" should be laughed *with*, rather than laughed *at*, was part of the late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century political agenda of liberalism.

Our histories tend to focus on liberalism as a political philosophy in which Thomas Hobbes and John Locke share co-ownership of the social-contract theory of government. This understanding of liberalism obscures the radical differences in their philosophies, differences that played out profoundly in the Age of Imperialism, and that were rooted in the different theories of mind and human behavior—in the psychology—on which each based his political philosophy. Hobbes is the original totalitarian, justifying power not as part of the divine order of things, but as a corrective to fundamental human selfishness. Thus, humor, according to Hobbes, is merely another form of aggression, and laughter is exultation in victory. In reaction to Hobbes, many eighteenth-century philosophers seized upon Locke's assertion that we know the world through the five external senses, positing a number of sensibilities—such as compassion, justice, and love—that were intrinsically social, and that create in human beings a fundamental gregariousness. The most important philosopher of what is often called "common sense" philosophy, after the idea that these sensibilities are common to us all, and sometimes called sentimental moral philosophy, is Francis Hutcheson, who began his studies with a series of three essays on humor, in which he developed the idea that our sense of humor is the sense that enables us to perceive differences among people as something pleasurable, as something to be embraced. From this beginning, he developed a system of moral philosophy of human connectedness that was widely taught in both the English- and French-speaking worlds, having a profound impact on the development of democratic governments. Yet, the odd by-product of sensibility is that it forced those who wished to conquer or enslave to define the conquered and enslaved as non-human in order to exclude them from the circle of sensibility. Such exclusions are by definition unstable and thus a constant source of comedy.

Unlike Thomas Jefferson, Franklin did not fully embrace the worldview of Hutcheson and other common sense philosophers, but he admired aspects of their writings. As much as Franklin's comic writing follows a relatively

traditional satirical groove, there are openings in his humorous works that prefigure major changes in nineteenth-century comedy. Again, how Franklin depicts colonial interaction with indigenous peoples is a touchstone of how Americans deployed comedy in politics. In two pieces from the revolutionary period, he speaks of the policy of how the colonists treated the native nations, first from the point of view of the failure of the Crown to protect the western colonists, and then from the point of view of mocking the racial prejudices of the Europeans.

The more public of these, ostensibly directed to Parliament, but mainly directed to Franklin's countrymen to declare his allegiance to revolution, was the heavy-handedly ironic "Rules By which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One" (1773), the nineteenth rule being:

XIX. Send armies into their country under pretence of protecting the inhabitants; but instead of garrisoning the forts on their frontiers with those troops, to prevent incursions, demolish those forts, and order the troops into the heart of the country, that the savages may be encouraged to attack the frontiers, and that the troops may be protected by the inhabitants: this will seem to proceed from your ill-will or your ignorance, and contribute farther to produce and strengthen an Opinion among them, *that you are no longer fit to govern them.*

—Franklin 1773: 445

Nothing here really challenges legitimate government; the justification for rebellion lies in the failure of a government to do its duty, not in the very idea of hierarchy.

Yet we know that Franklin became deeply subversive of feudal notions of government and hierarchy. By the time of the Revolution, his ironies grew ever deeper, ever subtler, and extremely difficult to interpret. We can see this by following another of his treatments of Native Americans. In the winter of 1783–4, idled at Passy in France during a lull in his diplomatic ventures, he wrote a description of native customs and character as a foil to American behavior and arrogance. Note the particular attack on conventional Christianity, a motif in so much of Franklin's writing:

Canassetego . . . said[:] Conrad, you have liv'd long among the white People, and know something of their Customs; I have been sometimes at Albany, and have observed that once in seven Days, they shut up their Shops and assemble all in the great House; tell me, what is it for? what do they do there? They meet there, says Conrad, to hear & learn *good things*. I do not doubt, says the Indian, that they tell you so; they have told me the same; but I doubt the Truth of what they say, & I will tell you my Reasons. I went lately

to Albany to sell my Skins, & buy Blankets, Knives, Powder, Rum, &c. You know I used generally to deal with Hans Hanson; but I was a little inclined this time to try some other Merchants. However I called first upon Hans, and ask'd him what he would give for Beaver; He said he could not give more than four Shillings a Pound; but, says he, I cannot talk on Business now; this is the Day when we meet together to learn *good things*, and I am going to the Meeting. So I thought to myself since I cannot do any Business to day, I may as well go to the Meeting too; and I went with him. There stood up a Man in black, and began to talk to the People very angrily. I did not understand what he said; but perceiving that he looked much at me, & at Hanson, I imagined he was angry at seeing me there; so I went out, sat down near the House, struck Fire & lit my Pipe; waiting till the Meeting should break up . . . When they came out I accosted [my] Merchant; well Hans, says I, I hope you have agreed to give more than four Shillings a Pound. No, says he, I cannot give so much. I cannot give more than three Shillings and six Pence. I then spoke to several other Dealers, but they all sung the same Song, three & six Pence, three & six Pence. This made it clear to me that my Suspicion was right; and that whatever they pretended of Meeting to learn *good things*, the real Purpose was to consult, how to cheat Indians in the Price of Beaver. Consider but a little, Conrad, and you must be of my Opinion. If they met so often to learn *good things*, they would certainly have learnt some before this time. But they are still ignorant. You know our Practice. If a white Man in travelling thro' our Country, enters one of our Cabins, we all treat him as I treat you; we dry him if he is wet, we warm him if he is cold, and give him Meat & Drink that he may allay his Thirst and Hunger, & we spread soft Furs for him to rest & sleep on: We demand nothing in return. But if I go into a white Man's House at Albany, and ask for Victuals & Drink, they say, where is your Money? and if I have none, they say, get out, you Indian Dog. You see they have not yet learnt those little *good things*, that we need no Meetings to be instructed in, because our Mothers taught them to us when we were Children. And therefore, it is impossible their Meetings should be as they say for any such purpose, or have any such Effect; they are only to contrive *the Cheating of Indians in the Price of Beaver*.

—Franklin 1997: 233–4

Franklin's approach here is to mock Calvinist doctrines and practice, alluding to the biblical injunctions to clothe the naked and feed the hungry, at the same time as he investigates cultural relativism. However, some of his first French readers interpreted this piece as evidence of the natural goodness of human beings against the corruptions of society, a position that Franklin, like Byrd, would never have taken. But the use of vernacular, not as a way to condescend, engages the proto-Romantic vision of common sense liberalism, which would

open substantial changes in politics and in the political uses of humor. In short, the way this humorous text opens to widely variant readings as either rationalist or proto-Romantic prefigures a dichotomy that fueled much humor of the nineteenth century.

To jump ahead a bit, in his wildly ironic *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (1857), Herman Melville devotes an entire chapter, “The Metaphysics of Indian Hating,” to the gap between cosmopolitan ideas of natural rights arising out of human nature and the tribalism of conquest. Melville creates a story—partly derived from histories of the frontier, partly from fictional accounts that justify genocide, such as Robert Montgomery Bird’s *Nick of the Woods* (1837)—to explore the ways in which European Americans identified with the native peoples they were destroying. In no way is it a comic chapter in what is often a very funny book, but it takes the fundamentally ironic play of American identity to reveal the perverse and destructive paradoxes on which it was built.

These colonial examples show humor engaged on opposite sides of the most obvious power dynamic—that between the colonists and their European rulers. They also bring to the surface some of the most important themes in American comedy: class status, racial status, the relations between nations, the connection of religion to power, trade as a form of power, the role of women in politics, the conquest of “nature,” the roles of trickery and deceit in politics. By the time these texts were published in print rather than circulated in manuscript, they fit easily into these obviously contested narratives; Franklin’s also fit—though few besides literary comedians like Herman Melville and Mark Twain understood this—into another contested narrative, which was an argument over what kinds of humor would play a role in the nation’s efforts to define itself.

A CROCKETT FULL OF WRY

Two of the most important post-revolutionary American comedians—Washington Irving and David Crockett—perfectly illustrate a number of these conflicts by straddling them. Irving (1783–1859) was America’s first commercially successful belletristic—as opposed to journalistic—writer, who, not surprisingly, depended almost entirely on an English audience for his sales. His entry into literature was not at all straightforward. The youngest of ten children, his father and brothers indulged his literary inclinations, supporting him while he was not supporting himself as an attorney. As part of a Federalist literary clique, he co-edited and co-wrote the satirical magazine *Salmagundi*, and built off the mild success of that journal to write *A Knickerbocker’s History of New York* (1809). Topical and conventional, these satires have none but historical interest now, though they do register Irving’s social conservatism.

In 1815, Irving, adrift professionally and socially, traveled to England in a vain effort to help rescue his family’s failing merchant business. His relatively

conservative American politics were very much a piece of old-style Whig approaches to social order—wealth and education were to be the new markers of status, but the idea that there would be leveling was certainly not part of that vision. The Federalist/Whig vision was one of an aristocracy of talent that would provide stability without tyranny. But the post-War-of-1812 merchant world was different. The rise and fall of merchant enterprises in the face of intense competition unpinned Irving's belief in a stable society predicated on trade. He became nostalgic for a fantasy feudalism, the kind that Sir Walter Scott imagined in his extraordinarily popular novels. That Scott had gone bankrupt and written his way out of debt, without "cheating" his creditors in bankruptcy proceedings, inspired Irving.

At the same time, as a citizen of the post-colonial United States and named for the hero of the Revolution, Irving was constantly reminded that, in England, where markers of status were still dominated by birth, he was considered a nobody. He bridled at that status, too. His serious books from then on are marked by a strange tension between writing histories that celebrate American culture and works that celebrate European feudalism. His masterpiece, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1819), engages that bifurcation, turning its contradictions into rich humor. Only when situated as part of the entire book does the complexity and richness of the humor of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" reveal itself. In "The Author's Account of Himself," Irving describes his temperamental inclination to travel in a desultory, nostalgic way, but points out his attraction to Europe in reference to the Comte de Buffon's thesis in *Histoire Naturelle* (1749–89) that all living beings in the New World are degenerate versions of old-world flora and fauna. Buffon considered the relatively low birth rates of some native tribes as a marker of degeneracy. According to Crayon,

I had, beside all this, an earnest desire to see the great men of the earth. We have, it is true, our great men in America: not a city but has an ample share of them. I have mingled among them in my time, and been almost withered by the shade into which they cast me; for there is nothing so baleful to a small man as the shade of a great one, particularly the great man of a city. But I was anxious to see the great men of Europe; for I had read in the works of various philosophers, that all animals degenerated in America, and man among the number. A great man of Europe, thought I, must therefore be as superior to a great man of America, as a peak of the Alps to a highland of the Hudson; and in this idea I was confirmed, by observing the comparative importance and swelling magnitude of many English travelers among us, who, I was assured, were very little people in their own country. I will visit this land of wonders, thought I, and see the gigantic race from which I am degenerated.

—Irving 1848: 11

Here Irving sets up an approach to humor that came to dominate comic writing in the US: to create a comic persona to establish a frame narrative within which a variety of other tales are told. The frame ostensibly serves to stabilize the reader's perspective on the inside narratives, providing us with a "gentleman" as the touchstone for our reading. In this, Irving's Crayon is not that different from Addison and Steele's *Spectator*. But unlike the *Spectator*, Crayon makes himself the butt of humor in a way that casts into doubt his honesty. We cannot read his irony. Is he a humorist—i.e., an odd man whose oddities are endearing and lead us to broaden our sympathies with different sorts of people? Perhaps, but the nagging doubt remains that Crayon is actually playing his readers, using sympathy as a tool in an elaborate, albeit merely aesthetic, confidence game.

The last tale in the book is the most famous, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," in which a Calvinist Yankee schoolmaster is tricked through his own gullibility into abandoning the courtship of a Dutch, country heiress. But how to read the tale, especially against the long list of European tales: the tales that Crayon went to Europe to collect? In the event that readers are overly comfortable in their interpretations, Irving appends a "Postscript" to destabilize the text:

FOUND IN THE HANDWRITING OF MR. KNICKERBOCKER.

THE preceding Tale is given, almost in the precise words in which I heard it related at a Corporation meeting of the ancient city of Manhattoes, at which were present many of its sagest and most illustrious burghers. The narrator was a pleasant, shabby, gentlemanly old fellow, in pepper-and-salt clothes, with a sadly humorous face; and one whom I strongly suspected of being poor,—he made such efforts to be entertaining.

—1848: 461

Crayon is already a frame narrator. He adds yet another two framers—Knickerbocker, the narrator of Irving's first book, and the unnamed poor "gentlemanly old fellow." The old fellow is interrogated about the story, which, according to common belief, would be meaningless if it didn't have a moral.

The story-teller, who was just putting a glass of wine to his lips, as a refreshment after his toils, paused for a moment, looked at his inquirer with an air of infinite deference, and, lowering the glass slowly to the table, observed, that the story was intended most logically to prove:—

"That there is no situation in life but has its advantages and pleasures—provided we will but take a joke as we find it:

"That, therefore, he that runs races with goblin troopers is likely to have rough riding of it.

"Ergo, for a country schoolmaster to be refused the hand of a Dutch heiress, is a certain step to high preferment in the state."

The cautious old gentleman knit his brows tenfold closer after this explanation, being sorely puzzled by the ratiocination of the syllogism; while, methought, the one in pepper-and-salt eyed him with something of a triumphant leer. At length, he observed, that all this was very well, but still he thought the story a little on the extravagant—there were one or two points on which he had his doubts.

—1848: 462

What happens if we take this interior narrator at his word? What if we “but take a joke as we find it?” If we do, we take a purely aesthetic approach to humor. But as entertainment, the joke is also commodity, worth a good meal. As performance, it gives the narrator the chance to triumph, to engage in Hobbesian “sudden glory,” turning the tables on the powerful, but stupid interrogator. With Crayon holding the final frame, we may, if we choose, return to the amiable humor of common sense. Irving gets to have it both ways—to express his rage at the hyper-competitive world of commerce and politics while engaging in an aesthetic softening of competition that makes it easy to indulge and accept caprice. This framing fit the time and place: the book’s success was so great that Irving was able to retire from the merchant business for the remainder of his life, turning to writing, turning the conundrums of politics and trade into profitable entertainment. In doing so, he established a tradition in American comic writing of engaging politics by pretending assiduously to avoid them, as in the case of one of the best-known venues for American literary humor of the Jacksonian era, *The Spirit of the Times* (founded in 1831). *The Spirit* was founded explicitly for gentlemen, to read stories of sport, turf, and field. The editorial practice required contributors to eschew partisan politics, but the explicit elitism of the journal turned it into a venue for cultural satire masquerading as amiable humor.

Irving’s liminal state between two systems of status also opened him to engaging American folklore in the context of European folk traditions. While the point of Crayon’s ramblings is primarily to explore the European past, he does, twice in *The Sketch Book*, create American folk tales, opening the door to literary explorations of American folk humor. A little over a decade later, this folk humor burst the bounds of political stump speeches into the print world via the writings of and about Davy Crockett.

The real David Crockett (1786–1836) came from one of those families whose migration west across the Alleghenies figured so prominently as a cause of the Revolutionary War. As an entrepreneur in Tennessee, Crockett experienced the financial ups and downs of a frontier economy, moving repeatedly from one place and one venture to another. Like so many frontiersmen, he was actively engaged in politics, in creating a new political culture. Crockett’s positions were essentially democratic, promoting the interests of small farmers and western



FIGURE 6.3: Davy Crockett fights off a cougar, from 1859 edition of *Life of Col. David Crockett*. Photo by Archive Photos / Stringer / Getty Images.

businessmen over the Federalist policies that served the interests of East-Coast merchants and financiers. And like so many frontiersmen, he took his politics personally, and he despised Andrew Jackson. Perhaps this is why, in his first term as a Congressman, he opposed Jackson's Indian removal policy. Regardless of the reason, the Whigs, looking for a way to counter Jackson's popularity among the common folk of the west with an equally compelling frontier figure, began to recruit Crockett as a Whig alternative to Jackson. An 1833 book, *Sketches and Eccentricities of Col. David Crockett*, published anonymously in Boston, augmented Crockett's fame. Written in a "gentlemanly style" to frame and control Crockett's home-spun anecdotes, the book nonetheless validates the vernacular, as one can see in one of the most frequently reprinted anecdotes from the book:

That Colonel Crockett could avail himself, in electioneering, of the advantages which well-applied satire ensures, the following anecdote will sufficiently prove.

In the canvass of the Congressional election of 18—, Mr. ***** was the colonel's opponent—a gentleman of the most pleasing and conciliating manners—who seldom addressed a person or a company without wearing upon his countenance a peculiarly good-humoured smile. The colonel, to counteract the influence of this winning attribute, thus alluded to it in a stump speech:

“Yes, gentlemen, he may get some votes by *grinning*, for he can *out-grin* me, and you know I ain’t slow—and to prove to you that I am not, I will tell you an anecdote. I was concerned myself—and I was fooled a little of the wickedest. You all know I love hunting. Well, I discovered a long time ago that a [raccoon] couldn’t stand my grin. I could bring one tumbling down from the highest tree. I never wasted powder and lead, when I wanted one of the creatures. Well, as I was walking out one night, a few hundred yards from my house, looking carelessly about me, I saw a ’coon planted upon one of the highest limbs of an old tree. The night was very *moony* and clear, and old Ratler was with me; but Ratler won’t bark at a ’coon—he’s a queer dog in that way. So, I thought I’d bring the lark down, in the usual way, *by a grin*. I set myself—and, after grinning at the ’coon a reasonable time, found that he didn’t come down. I wondered what was the reason—and I took another steady grin at him. Still he was *there*. It made me a little mad; so I felt round and got an old limb about five feet long—and, planting one end upon the ground, I placed my chin upon the other, and took *a rest*. I then grinned my best for about five minutes—but the cursed ’coon hung on. So, finding I could not bring him down by grinning, I determined to have him—for I thought he must be a droll chap. I went over to the house, got my axe, returned to the tree, saw the ’coon still there, and began to cut away. Down it come, and I run forward; but d—n the ’coon was there to be seen. I found that what I had taken for one, was a large knot upon the branch of the tree—and, upon looking at it closely, I saw that *I had grinned all the bark off, and left the knot perfectly smooth*.

“Now, fellow-citizens,” continued the colonel, “you must be convinced that, in the *grinning line*, I myself am not slow—yet, when I look upon my opponent’s countenance, I must admit that he is my superior. You must all admit it. Therefore, be wide awake—look sharp—and do not let him grin you out of your votes.”

—Anon. 1834: 126–7

This book paved the way for Crockett’s campaign autobiography, which he styled as a corrective. The autobiography turned out to be quite a hit, and even though Crockett narrowly lost his final election bid to a Jackson ally, his literary notoriety popularized a new note in American writing. While Crockett died shortly thereafter in the battle of the Alamo, a number of Crockett almanacs appeared for years thereafter, widely disseminating American anecdotes and tall tales.

Ironically, while the Whigs hoped to promote Crockett as an antidote to the slave interests of the South and of the imperialist impulses of frontier dwellers, the cult of personality, elevated to a myth, promoted exactly what the Whigs hoped to discourage. The 1833 book recounted a few telling political anecdotes, but spent more ink on hunting stories, which serve much more broadly as

allegories of conquest. The bear hunt in particular became a motif throughout the nineteenth century, with one of the most important comic stories of the century, Thomas Bangs Thorpe's "The Big Bear of Arkansas" (1841), first published in *The Spirit of the Times*, elaborating on and refining the tradition. Again, we have a frame story. A gentleman narrator unobtrusively marks the progress of civilization by retelling the story of a bear hunt that kills a "creation bear" (Thorpe 1854: 92), turning the frontier into farmland, but at the high cost of the end of nature. The frame narrator's amiable and mildly Romantic sensibility allows a reader to feel gentle nostalgia over the loss, but more pride that civilization inexorably replaces the frontiersman with the gentleman, horsepower with steam power, anecdote with literacy.

Which is not to say that this gentlemanly frame around vernacular voices served merely imperial motives. James Russell Lowell used the frame narrative to surround vernacular verse in *The Bigelow Papers* (1848), an explicitly anti-imperialist satire against the Mexican-American War (1846–8) and the potential expansion of slavery that conquest promised. Which is not also to say that the framing of vernacular held. In the pro-slavery, anti-Whig satires of George Washington Harris, the American vernacular of the character Sut Lovingood conquers the frame narrator, showing the vitality of new words, new rhythms, and new metaphors arising from Americans who write from their own experience rather than from tropes originating in English literature. Occasionally, antebellum writers dispensed with the frame altogether, letting the vernacular carry the weight of the message, as in Charles Farrar Browne's *Artemus Ward: His Book* (1862), a collection of newspaper pieces begun in 1858. Browne's common sense vernacular engagement with American culture at first argued against sectionalism, but, after the Southern states seceded, sounded notes of everyday patriotism.

The role of journalism in this story cannot be overstated. Advances in print technology and in transportation turned newspapers and journals into truly mass media. Given that almost every journal espoused an explicitly political agenda, and given that the absence of robust copyright law encouraged journals to exchange news, editorials, and filler, the US had a truly national forum for debate. Given the convenient fiction that newspapers were written for and read exclusively by men, whereas magazines were more tailored to specific audiences, including women and children, newspaper writers and editors exercised more creativity in pushing the bounds of "correct" writing. Vernacular expressions and risqué topics were normalized in regular reporting and celebrated in the work of various "correspondents," who often wrote under pseudonyms. One of the most popular was New York City editor and writer Robert Henry Newell who penned sharp satires of the South and of "Copperheads" under the pseudonym Orpheus C. Kerr, a pun that plays in two directions. The last name is a homonym for "cur," and the entire name can be read as "Office Seeker." Abraham Lincoln, who was no slouch with an anecdote himself, was a big fan

of Newell's Kerr. The feeling was reciprocal: "Our President, my boy, has a tale for every emergency, as a rat-trap has an emergency for every tail" (Newell 1863: 331). As was so often the case with successful journalism, Newell's satires were collected in volumes that had wide sales both in the US and abroad, furthering the idea that America's first cultural product was a distinctive humor.

TRICKSTERS AND UNDERDOGS

The degree to which we know much about US humor of the nineteenth century depends on written records, which means for the most part that we have few records of those who were out of power. Nonetheless, the intrusion of folk motifs into the mainstream print culture meant that traditions of African Americans and of Native Americans found their way in, though it takes a fair amount of reconstruction to find them. Much of the folk humor of the old Southwest hybridizes Native-American and African motifs, some of which appears in Southern dialect, some in animal fables. Given the hybridization, it is not easy to sort sources, though I will try below in my discussion of Mark Twain. But those Native Americans and African Americans who did write in English tended not to borrow on their traditions of folk humor in their writings. Black abolitionists, for example, preferred to use biblical or religious motifs, or to invoke heroic or sympathetic themes. Even when humor intrudes, it tends to be understated, as when Frederick Douglass, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), uses such nuanced euphemism to describe his fight with slave-breaker Covey, that only a careful reading puts it in the same comic tradition as the brawls that were staples of Southwestern humor—that is to say, that Frederick kicks Covey's assistant in the testicles and throws Covey in cow-shit: "on the *not over* clean ground" (1994: 284). Black folk humor identified as such came into mainstream consciousness in the Bre'r Rabbit tales, collected and framed by a white writer, Joel Chandler Harris (1848–1908), who first printed some of these tales in the *Atlanta Constitution* in the 1870s as part of the newspaper's efforts to promote a "New South." Harris's efforts were intended to spread the idea of a tractable black free labor force to alleviate the concerns of investors that the South remained an unstable and violent place. When Harris published a number of these tales in a different frame in *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings* (1880), he was surprised that the book was sold as humor, but the publisher was right. These are deeply subversive comic tales that use the animal fable and trickster traditions to articulate how an enslaved people can make a way out of no way—at the same time the humor creates a hint of optimism and much solidarity.

It is interesting that the origin of the rabbit is contested, with many remarking that the Cherokee often used a rabbit as a trickster figure, while others say that these tales came directly from Africa. The origin is unimportant in one sense, in that both peoples used trickster figures in their humorous traditions, and that

oral traditions by normal practice are syncretic. The similarity in how these tales were used *vis-à-vis* the dominating white culture is what really matters. Comic modes work by allowing a person to manage cognitive dissonance by seeing opposites simultaneously, something like a gestalt image that is two things at once but that is usually perceived at first as just one, before a forced perspective change reveals the alternative. As such, comedy can be very disruptive of power structures. If American colonists could use humor first to distance themselves from England, then to define themselves as different, while also using humor to justify their conquest of the indigenous nations, then the conquered could use comedy to psychologically challenge their oppression.

Later in the century, Charles Chesnutt recovered the use of some of these tales in his short story “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887), published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and in his tales of “Uncle Julius,” who plays his postbellum northern white employers by pretending to be superstitious in such a way that he is given gifts in exchange for his “suffering.” Yet Chesnutt deepens the irony by pointing out that racial progress is halted by the ironic posture of the oppressed, which reifies the oppression, preventing a gestalt shift to equality.

White women had a different challenge in that wit and satire were considered male prerogatives. Even as writing became a career option for women over the course of the nineteenth century, they were expected to veer no further from sentiment than the sense of amiable humor. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s brief comic interludes in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) follow the usual political course of extending sympathy through gentle laughter, and her *Sam Lawson’s Oldtown Fireside Stories* (1872) remains mostly in this groove, only occasionally pushing toward satire. Sticking to amiable humor was not a problem for Stowe, who intended her writing to teach common sense moral philosophy. It was a problem, however, for the best-known female humorist of the nineteenth century, Sarah Willis Parton (1811–72), who published under the pen name “Fanny Fern.” Like many women of her time, Parton turned to writing when matrimony failed. Unlike most, she became extraordinarily successful not by fitting the mold, but by breaking it. She wrote for newspapers—in the mid-1850s she was the best-paid newspaper columnist in the US—and leveraged the flexibility accorded by using a pen name. She spoke frankly, as well as comically, about the strictures that bind women. Like Benjamin Franklin before her, she relied on puns, physical comedy, irony, and aphorism to capture and keep the attention of her reading audience. Her best-known aphorism: “The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

THE CARPET-BAG II

Long before he took the pen name Mark Twain, Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835–1910) published his first comic story—“The Dandy Frightening the

Squatter" (1852)—in B.P. Shillaber's comic magazine, *The Carpet-Bag*. Shillaber (1814–90) made his name as a humorist with his creation of Mrs. Partington, an American Mrs. Malaprop, whose dialect monologues first appeared in the *Boston Daily Post* in the late 1830s. As a mode of satire, the female monologist was used by Frances Miriam Whitcher (1811–52) in the *Widow Bedott Papers* (1840s, collected in 1855) and by George William Curtis (1824–92) in *The Potiphar Papers* (1850–3, collected in 1853), but Shillaber's efforts are less pointed. His creation condescends toward social climbers, but his treatment of her is gentle enough to make her a sympathetic, as well as a laughable character. So it is not surprising that his journal was eclectic in style and substance. Clemens's contribution is a conventional interaction between a cosmopolitan and a country boy, the latter exposing the hollowness of the cosmopolitan's pretensions.

As a conventional piece, it is satirical, in a long line of satires that simply flipped the valence of what is valuable, from a European idea of cultured hierarchy to a more democratic idea of common sense and widespread competence. We see this in Benjamin Franklin's choice to wear a coonskin cap instead of a powdered wig in the polite society of Paris. We see this in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's "What is an American?" (1782), in which he declares in Latin—in the guise of a literate, but unlettered, American farmer—"Ubi panis ibi patria" ("Where there is bread, there is my country") (1782: 54). We see it, too, in US poet Joel Barlow's epigraph to the patriotic poem "The Hasty Pudding" (1796), instantiating Crèvecoeur's statement in a comic mistranslation of Horace's famous dictum, "Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit ultie dulci," usually translated as "He carries every point" or "He wins every argument who mixes with the useful (i.e., facts) with something sweet (i.e., something poetic or artistic)." Barlow translates it: "He makes a good breakfast who mixes pudding with molasses" (1892: 46). These satiric jabs do not ask the maker to see things differently, only to value what he has over that which others say he should value. It validates the vernacular over the language of the erudite, and patriotism, provincialism, and chauvinism over cosmopolitanism.

Such an approach validated Clemens's personal experience: his childhood was spent near the western frontier in Missouri, and while he trained as a printer in a rural print shop, and thus had some access to a range of writings through newspaper exchanges, his horizons were contained through limited formal education and limited experience with a variety of kinds of people. He had the prejudices of his time and place, condescending to the slaves in his community, imbibing anti-Catholic and anti-"immigrant" ideas, and supporting what was commonly called "Anglo-Saxon civilization." He also shared a chip-on-the-shoulder patriotism that scorned "civilization" as a corrupting European influence.

By the end of his career, Clemens was the ultimate cosmopolitan, having traveled the world as well as having lived in locations spanning more than half

the globe, having developed friendships across every human line that he once accepted as legitimate, having actively campaigned against racism and imperialism, having actively supported women's rights—in short, having renounced almost every one of his early prejudices. Yet the Mark Twain persona he used so well for nearly fifty years depended regularly until the very end on playing the gap between cultivation and innocence. That gap, that source of comedy, helped facilitate his remarkable transformation, but only after Twain collapsed the distinction between satire and humor, or, rather, when he enabled a gestalt oscillation between these two psychologically different modes of comedy.

The quickest way to document that transformation is to look at the substantial body of travel writings that Clemens produced under the name “Mark Twain.” His first major commission as a freelance writer came in 1866 from the Sacramento *Union* to write letters from the Sandwich, now Hawaiian, Islands. The owners of the *Union* supported increased trade with the Islands and hoped for eventual annexation by the United States. While European powers, most notably Britain, had designs on the territory, many Americans felt that the US had a geographical edge. Indeed, this era witnessed the beginnings of a Pacific strategy for the US. On his trip to Polynesia, Clemens met Anson Burlingame, Minister Plenipotentiary to China. If the US was to have an East Asian presence, Hawaii would serve as an excellent way station. So the *Union* commissioned Clemens because he was a well-known comic writer in California and Nevada, who had proven himself fluent in local politics and knew how to engage in the kind of rough-and-tumble journalism that both sold papers and carried every point.

As a foreign correspondent, Clemens developed what became a pattern. He “boned up on” the locale before and during his travels. In this case, most of the accounts of the islands were told by Protestant American missionaries. While Clemens was at this point a freethinker, he nonetheless accepted a historical teleology that Protestantism precedes freedom and democracy. Hence, he saw the missions as helping the natives prepare to resist England. Naturally, Clemens felt, an alliance with the US would bring the Hawaiians into the modern world of trade, technology, and democracy. But he also had to create a narrative structure that was entertaining. As much as his Mark Twain persona to this point had been a rough-and-tumble, hard-drinking, straight-talking satirist, he needed foils, and going to a place where both he and his audience knew nobody and nothing, he had to carry his foils with him. He thus split his journalistic point of view in two, recreating Mark Twain as a sentimental, well-read gentleman who traveled with a *déclassé*, clear-eyed realist side kick, Mr. Brown. When Mr. Twain engages in panegyrics over palm trees, Mr. Brown says they look like parasols struck by lightning. When Mr. Brown, “a bitter enemy to sentiment” (quoted in Rasmussen 2007: 331), suffers seasickness, Mr. Twain tries to take Brown's mind off of his pain by reciting sentimental poetry, which relieves Brown by acting as

an emetic. This comic byplay mostly serves as comic interlude between long pages of facts about Hawaiian trade, Hawaiian labor, and the global politics of competitive imperialism. But it opened an important possibility for the Twain figure—he could be simultaneously sympathetic *and* the butt of the joke. That also opened the possibility that Twain could see the natives from the point of view of Brown, not Brown the chauvinist, but Brown the skeptic about how he was supposed to see things. In these letters, Clemens waffled back and forth between seeing the missionaries as agents of enlightenment and instruments of torture. By the time he reincorporated these letters into his second book of travels, *Roughing It* (1872), the latter conception became predominant, with the missionaries turning a paradisiacal garden of leisure and innocence into a Protestant labor market motivated by money, guilt, and the threat of hell. While the pro-imperialistic bits remain in an attenuated form, they seem pro forma rather than deeply part of the author's outlook and agenda.

But before he could get to that position, he worked through his second major commission as a traveling correspondent, contracting with three newspapers, two in New York and one in California, to write letters about the *SS Quaker City's* travels to Europe and "The Holy Lands." He creates a middle-brow American persona, neither trying to be higher than experience or lower, but often *playing* the lower as a joke on Europe. Some of the funniest passages are about his experience with some like-minded travelers who play stupid in order to frustrate European guides. Their comments, which seem to be merely non-sequiturs or manifestations of an ignorance so profound as to be idiotic, are replete with puns and inside jokes that depend on American customs and American vernacular. When all else fails, they fall back on the question, "Is he dead?," which suggests that Americans should be asking this question of all old-world culture. This kind of ugly Americanism, not unlike that of Franklin, Crèvecoeur, and Barlow, is chauvinistic, replacing old-world standards with new American ones, as in the case of portraying Lake Tahoe as the *sine qua non* of beauty, outstripping Lake Como and the Sea of Galilee. Twain's raucous performance as an inconsistent, intensely vital, very "American" comedian sold well in England, and in other parts of Europe, as an example of the droll barbarism of the New World. When he returned to England a few years later and saw the way Joaquin Miller was lionized for playing the cowboy, Clemens was embarrassed by the image of America that he had helped create.

What he needed, he came to understand, was to refine the narrative stance. Since he couldn't use a frame narrator to give stability to the Mark Twain character, he needed to find a new structure. The structure he found was the same old structure of the practical joke, but told by the victim retrospectively from a position of greater wisdom. In writing his way into his second travel narrative, *Roughing It*, he told the story of the naïf cosmopolitan who learns that a real cosmopolitan can rough it with the locals in order to expand his

internal horizons. The naïf narrator, in narrative time, brings his preconceptions with him to the West, learning again and again that the savagery of the West is not what it appears. He learns this repeatedly in his own experience and puts it forth in animal allegories, including in a story of “the cayote” (coyote) and the “town-dog” (Twain 1984b: 562). Twain’s coyote may well be borrowed from the Native-American trickster figure, “old man coyote,” being both self-destructively greedy and extremely creative in playing on the arrogance of others. That’s Twain’s West in a nutshell: self-destructive and creative. Indeed, reviews of the book said either that it was a satire or a celebration of the West. The point is that the humorous perspective Clemens created in having Twain gently mock himself manifests an ambivalence that is open both to the fecund creativity and destructiveness of the West as the ultimate melting pot, where the energy creates a violent and creative turbulence, one that makes a vigorous new language, one that breeds outlaws, one that generates mobs, one that spawns courage, one that is intensely human and therefore difficult to pigeonhole. A melting pot, after all, is a crucible that destroys in order to create something new and that can only be understood on its own terms, and only from the vantage point of time. Time softens the stinging rebuke of being the butt of satire into a humorous acceptance of change.

The most notable change in the Twain persona marks a major expansion of Clemens’s own perspective on cultural differences. From being a hooligan who played practical jokes on the Chinese in the mid-1860s in San Francisco, Clemens evolves to having Mark Twain defend their culture and their presence in the US. Paradoxically, he did so by playing a social class card: gentlemen and ladies, Twain says, do not disparage the Chinese. The confusion between the way he usually validated common folk through their language or their ability to turn the tables on their “betters” and the way he settled into a superior posture in this statement apparently did not register with Clemens at the time, perhaps because collapsing the Brown/Twain *pas de deux* into a solo performance forced Twain to play both sides of the social class street simultaneously.

Yet the formula allowed Clemens to deepen his art to investigate some of the most difficult aspects of American culture. One of his finest works, “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It” (1874), follows the *Roughing It* formula; it is structured as a joke on the frame narrator, “Mister C.” Mister C. relates a time when he teased a Negro servant, Aunt Rachel. Her jollity in response to his chaffing leads him to make a remark that humiliates him insofar as it reveals his shallow inhumanity: “Aunt Rachel, how is it that you’ve lived sixty years and never had any trouble?” (Twain 2012: 103). With quiet dignity, in her vernacular, she relates how, when in slavery, her children were sold away from her, and how, during the Civil War, she was reunited with her son, who had escaped and had enlisted in the Union Army. She has the last word, “Oh no, Misto C—, I hain’t had no trouble. An’ no joy!” (2012: 107), leaving Mister C.

in a silence that explodes prejudices. The structure of the joke gives the reader distance that allows the satire to hit the naïve sophisticate, Mister C—, while letting the reader occupy the humorous position of after-the-fact wisdom.

A Tramp Abroad (1880), Mark Twain's next European travel narrative, was more sophisticated than *Innocents Abroad*, in part because of what Clemens learned about the Twain persona in *Roughing It*. *Tramp*, too, is narrated by a naïf cosmopolitan, which enables Clemens to engage some of the major problems of American identity, class standing, and tolerance and abjection in the face of European tradition. In short, the work showcases a more mature narrative voice, one which finds American identity within, rather than merely defining it against the world. And yet the book was born in a state of angst. Under financial pressure and living far from home in order to collect material, Clemens couldn't always find the *humor* to make the book work. On January 30, 1879, he wrote to his good friend and editorial confidante William Dean Howells, "I wish I *could* give those sharp satires on European life which you mention, but of course a man can't write successful satire except he be in a calm judicial good-humor" (Twain 2016: 314). A deeper angst hides behind this lament; his political perspectives had changed rapidly over the preceding decade, and he was stuck in the middle of a novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), that was changing under his hand from a satire on fundamentalist Christianity to a deeper and darker investigation of America's racial past and present. At the root of this crisis was his concern about what a humorous art should be. His structural discovery had worked, but its implications were still only half-formed. Struggling with his European travel narrative, Clemens turned back to American material in the interpolated "Jim Baker's Blue-Jay Yarn," the best known and most frequently reprinted section in *A Tramp Abroad*.

To get a full sense of the story's impact, one must back up to the preceding chapter in which Twain slips into the Neckar woods near Heidelberg to commune with European folklore: "At the time I am writing of, I had been reading so much of this literature that sometimes I was not sure but I was beginning to believe in the gnomes and fairies as realities" (2010b: 20). "One afternoon I got lost in the woods," he continues, "and presently fell into a train of dreamy thought about animals which talk, and kobolds, and enchanted folk, and the rest of the pleasant legendary stuff; and so, by stimulating my fancy, I finally got to imagining I glimpsed small flitting shapes here and there down the columned aisles of the forest." He is startled out of his reverie by an animal that *can* talk: a raven. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" (1845) comes immediately to mind, but Twain, rather than slipping into a melancholy projection like Poe's narrator, vacillates between shame and anger, believing the raven is mocking him, commenting on his clothing, his style, his very presence. Twain asks us how much of our sense of reality is projection, and wonders whether humor

might bring us back to reality. After all, Twain's *comic* interpretation of a raven's emotional tenor is consonant with the tone of its voice. He asks us to imagine what Poe's raven really sounded like when it squawked, rather than intoned "Nevermore" (Poe 1984: 83). Comic perspective blows away the blues. And then Twain introduces an inside narrator, Jim Baker, who suffers profound blues because he has failed to "strike it rich" as a miner. He has abandoned himself to a ghost town in the California foothills, moping while watching the local animals. In comes the blue jay, not only a common, social, and raucous bird in California, but also the trickster figure in the folk tales of many Pacific Northwest Native-American tribes. Baker certainly seems to get the idea—he describes the jay as having just about every negative character trait of human beings before concluding:

Yes, sir, a jay is everything that a man is. A jay can cry, a jay can laugh, a jay can feel shame, a jay can reason and plan and discuss, a jay likes gossip and scandal, a jay has got a sense of humor, a jay knows when he is an ass just as well as you do—maybe better. If a jay ain't human, he better take in his sign.

—Twain 2010b: 23

The list rises to the most important points: a sense of humor yields self-awareness. Once again, Twain taps a trickster tradition to allegorize the human experience. As the tale unfolds, a blue jay attempts to store acorns for his family by dropping them down a knothole. Because the knothole is in the roof of an abandoned miner's cabin, the jay can't make the hole work as a stash, no matter how many acorns he drops in it. Exhausted, he finally stops:

He just had strength enough to crawl up on to the comb and lean his back agin the chimbly, and then he collected his impressions and begun to free his mind. I see in a second that what I had mistook for profanity in the mines was only just the rudiments, as you may say.

Another jay was going by, and heard him doing his devotions, and stops to inquire what was up. The sufferer told him the whole circumstance, and says, "Now yonder's the hole, and if you don't believe me, go and look for yourself." So this fellow went and looked, and comes back and says, "How many did you say you put in there?" "Not any less than two tons," says the sufferer. The other jay went and looked again. He couldn't seem to make it out, so he raised a yell, and three more jays come. They all examined the hole, they all made the sufferer tell it over again, then they all discussed it, and got off as many leather-headed opinions about it as an average crowd of humans could have done.

They called in more jays; then more and more, till pretty soon this whole region 'peared to have a blue flush about it. There must have been five

thousand of them; and such another jawing and disputing and ripping and cussing, you never heard. Every jay in the whole lot put his eye to the hole and delivered a more chuckle-headed opinion about the mystery than the jay that went there before him. They examined the house all over, too. The door was standing half open, and at last one old jay happened to go and light on it and look in. Of course, that knocked the mystery galley-west in a second. There lay the acorns, scattered all over the floor. He flopped his wings and raised a whoop. "Come here!" he says, "Come here, everybody; hang'd if this fool hasn't been trying to fill up a house with acorns!" They all came a-swooping down like a blue cloud, and as each fellow lit on the door and took a glance, the whole absurdity of the contract that that first jay had tackled hit him home and he fell over backwards suffocating with laughter, and the next jay took his place and done the same.

—2010b: 25–6

Twain's offhanded reference to the biblical passages Luke 12:6 and Matt. 10:29—passages he frequently references in his satires against Christianity—have an interesting twist here. He usually comments on those verses by asking, who cares if God knows that the sparrows fall, they die just the same? Here, on the contrary, he has blue jays die laughing. They fall over backwards, but are born again in wisdom, wisdom of the absurdity of making a living in an indifferent world. The oddity is not that they recognize the futility, but that they are liberated into joy. Their perspective shift makes labor into comedy. The tale's ending drives home the point:

Well, sir, they roosted around here on the house-top and the trees for an hour, and guffawed over that thing like human beings. It ain't any use to tell me a blue-jay hasn't got a sense of humor, because I know better. And memory, too. They brought jays here from all over the United States to look down that hole, every summer for three years. Other birds too. And they could all see the point, except an owl that come from Nova Scotia to visit the Yo Semite, and he took this thing in on his way back. He said he couldn't see anything funny in it. But then he was a good deal disappointed about Yo Semite, too.

—2010b: 26

The perspective that comes from the sense of humor—and by this, Twain explicitly means the ability to laugh at one's own errors, to enjoy being the butt of one's own joke—is the prerequisite to appreciating the world's beauty. As he put it later, "The function of humor is that of the screw in the opera glass—it adjusts one's focus." While this could apply to either satire or to amiable humor, both have a telos that assumes one knows the right focus to begin with. But

anyone who has ever used binoculars knows that changing the focus means you see different things. If you are not seeking a particular object, you can let the screw discover what you would not otherwise have seen. At this midpoint in his career, then, Twain is abandoning certitude in favor of discovery, and the moral tenor of his work makes a corresponding shift.

His last travel narrative, *Following the Equator* (1897), came at a time when he was experimenting with radical perspective shifts in humor based on dream visions, transmutation of human consciousness to a bacterium, a pun-filled history of his own age written from the distant future, travel narratives of the cosmos written by a dead man traveling to heaven, travel narratives of Satan reporting on the “experiment” that is the earth, and other literary extravaganzas. This kind of experimentation went along with the shift in political and moral perspective that enabled him to say, “True irreverence is irreverence for another man’s god” (2010a: 750). It enabled him to praise the Maori’s stand against the English as perfect patriotism. It enabled him to describe Cecil Rhodes as a charlatan adventurer. It enabled him to turn a humorous travelogue into a steady attack on the entire Euro-American enterprise of imperialism. Twain found the paradoxes at the heart of American identity, and by turning them into the fuel for humor, he not only changed his own perspectives on the just uses of power, he changed our understanding of how humor can engage power—in the same way that recent scholarship treats comedy as a subversive phenomenon, rather than one that upholds cultural norms and power structures. While Twain’s hope for the power of humor is absurdly optimistic, it still inspires:

[The human] race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter.—Power, Money, Persuasion, Supplication, Persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug,—push it a little—crowd it a little—weaken it a little, century by century: but only Laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand.

—Twain 1969: 166

CHAPTER SEVEN

Laughter

The Ugly History

MATTHEW KAISER

Porcine snort; giddy giggle; orgasmic cackle. It is not the auditory texture of laughter—its volume, pitch, and rhythm—that attracts gelotologists and other philosophers of laughter, nor is it laughter’s violent byproducts: facial contortions, respiratory distress, and slapped knees. Scholars are drawn to what lies *beneath* laughter: in interstices of mind and body, where impulse and will commingle, where animal and soul cohabit, and where laughter, it is said, is born. Laughter “bursts on this fence,” Anca Parvulescu claims, “between the lower and upper parts of the body, the nonplace where they intermix” (2010: 9).

Laughter *reveals* us—in tiny titter-bursts or in convulsive denudations. It pries us open from within. “By nothing do men show their character,” Goethe mused, “more than by the things they laugh at” (1908: 122). Laughter is oracular: a subverbal missive, a vatic spasm coughed up from a corner of our being beyond self-knowledge or control. Where Charles Baudelaire heard in laughter a “monstrous” presence, “one of the clearest marks of Satan in man” (1972: 145), Max Beerbohm detected dulcet strains of “surrender,” a youthful desire to bond, and conjectured that “a man to whom such laughter has often been granted” is content “to die in a work-house” (1921: 305, 307). Thomas Hobbes caught in “those Grimaces called LAUGHTER” a sour note, our “*Glory*” (2004: 37) at the stumbles of others. Enlightenment philosopher Francis Hutcheson heard rationality in a chuckle, refinement in a tee-hee. To Hutcheson’s affable ear, laughter communicated delight in incongruity, as when a deft writer “bring[s] resemblances from subjects of a quite different kind from

the subject to which they are compared” (1750: 19). Whether a mark of depravity, fellowship, or cognitive nimbleness, laughter is invariably understood to have meaning. Like pilgrims to a sacred mount, history’s sages, those shapers and arbiters of knowledge—philosophers, poets, and scientists—have scrambled up the quaking sides of laughter, have peered, one after the other, into its cavity, and have declared in turn: “How much lies in Laughter: the cipher-key, wherewith we decipher the whole man!” (Carlyle 2000: 26).

BEHIND THE TEETH

No chapter in the history of laughter is more consequential, or ideologically fraught, than the one that concerns us here: the dozen or so decades spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an age of burgeoning nationalism, technological innovation, and scientific materialism. It is during this transformative period in the West that the biological and psychological foundations of laughter were meticulously mapped, its secrets exposed, by thinkers steeped in the social Darwinism of their day. By the time Benjamin Disraeli proclaimed Queen Victoria Empress of India in 1876, canonical theories of laughter—Aristotle’s, Hobbes’s, even Kant’s—were regarded as quaintly insufficient, any cultural relevance or critical popularity they still enjoyed contingent upon their reconcilability with advances in medicine or with biological-deterministic explanations of human behavior. Laughter was epistemologically *conquered* in the Age of Empire, subjected to totalizing and normative systems of knowledge. Anatomists stalked chuckles in the nervous system. Freudians chased giggles into the unconscious. Darwinists debated the meaning of monkey screeches.

Chortles, snickers, and guffaws. When compelled to speak their “truth,” what did they reveal? By the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of laughter was entangled in middle-class ideologies of health. “Without a well-trained capacity to perceive the ludicrous,” Edwin Whipple warned, “the health suffers” (1849: 86). By the turn of the century, theories of laughter were mired in the science of eugenics, the logic of physical and racial fitness. Sir Francis Galton, the father of eugenics, defined the new discipline as “the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage” (2004: 35). Increasingly, the impulse to laugh and the muscular spasms constitutive of it were understood, in utilitarian terms, as reflexive attempts by the body—and by society—to achieve homeostasis or internal stability. A laughing people are a healthy people. To laugh is to be “normal,” in a social sense, in that one “fits in,” is capable of reading social cues, and in a somatic one, in that one’s nervous system functions at an optimal level, reacts with requisite limberness to external stimuli. So long as it was not immoderate, indiscriminate, or hysterical, laughter was proof that

individuals, entire nations and races, had adapted to their environments, had achieved harmony and balance. The “power of irrepressible laughter,” Welsh poet Lewis Morris asserted in 1897, “is the gift of youth, and youth only, whether in nations or in individuals” (1897: 323). Humorless people smacked of pathology and maladjustment. They were “hard and wooden,” American theologian Charles Carroll Everett complained: “Intercourse with them is like driving a wagon without springs” (1888: 197). “One justly suspects the humanity or sanity of a person who cannot laugh,” declared psychiatrist Henry Maudsley (1902: 331). Victorian novelist George Meredith compared “non-laughers” to “dead bodies” (1905: 9). Philosopher Paul Carus did not go that far: humorless people were merely “sick” in his eyes (1898: 251). “A man who cannot laugh,” he said, “had better consult his physician,” for “he is devoid of that elasticity of spirit which is so necessary for carrying the burden of life with ease” (Carus 1898: 251). Carus viewed laughter through the lens of evolutionary psychology. Laughter “consists in quickly repeated ejaculations of a triumphal shouting,” cries of “success” in the struggle for survival (1898: 261).

By the early twentieth century, people were laughing with therapeutic intent, to express or to achieve well-being, to optimize and refresh their bodies, to maintain mental health. No doubt many of them, marginalized peoples and members of oppressed populations, were “laughing to keep from crying,” to quote Langston Hughes (1981: 1), but here, too, laughter is understood as palliative, if not curative. With the epistemological authority of science on the rise in the West in the 1920s and 1930s, the health benefits of laughter were touted to middle-class consumers of hygiene magazines, alongside tips about preventing tuberculosis and testimonials about the salubrious effects of golf. “Laughter was always an art,” S.A. Shoemaker declares in the April 1938 edition of *Hygeia*, a publication of the American Medical Association, but “recently it has become a science” (1938: 314). Shoemaker quotes an unnamed “medical authority,” who credits laughter with being “the most rejuvenating of all exercises, improving the appetite and digestion, enhancing the freedom of circulation and respiration” (1938: 314). Not only is laughter “more effective than any drug,” Shoemaker contends, but “many a neurosis or psychosis might have been prevented by a well timed laugh” (1938: 379). To a generation weaned on Darwin and Freud, laughter awakened a more vital—a primordial, unfettered—part of the self. It contained tantalizing clues to human evolution. It laid bare the unconscious. Laughter “has two doors,” critic John Greig claimed, one “opening . . . towards the darkling past, and the other towards the brightening future of mankind” (1923: 152). Never had the stakes been higher for laughter. Never had it revealed so much.

Laughter had its share of detractors in the nineteenth century: moralists, worrywarts, and curmudgeons, who associated the howls of youth and the roar of the music hall with vulgarity, intemperance, and anarchy. Others objected to

laughter on quirkier grounds. In *Shut Your Mouth and Save Your Life* (1869), American painter and dental-hygiene enthusiast George Catlin complained that, “in *laughing*,” people “draw currents of air through their teeth,” causing “diseases and decay which no dentists can cure” (1891: 84). Because “Man” is “a *talking* and *laughing* animal, exposing his teeth to the air a great portion of the day,” “he is oftentimes toothless at middle age, and in seven cases in ten, in his grave before he is fifty” (Catlin 1891: 40–1). As the century advances, the enemies of laughter find themselves outnumbered. Their frustration is palpable,



FIGURE 7.1: The Hearty Laugh of the Gentler Sex, c. 1875 (engraving from *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*). London: J. Burns, 1875, courtesy of Matthew Kaiser.

as is the desperation with which they depict laughter as a menace to public health. Take George Vasey. In 1875, he sounded the alarm in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*, declaring “the subject of laughter is ‘no laughing matter’” (1875: vii). Like Catlin, Vasey encourages readers to avoid laughing altogether—for the sake of their lives. He recites “the injurious effects” of “laughter in infants,” as well as “the moral and intellectual characteristics of those who are addicted to laughing” (Vasey 1875: xiv, xv). Laughter, he cautions, “in very many cases ends fatally,” if “the passage through the lungs be impeded for more

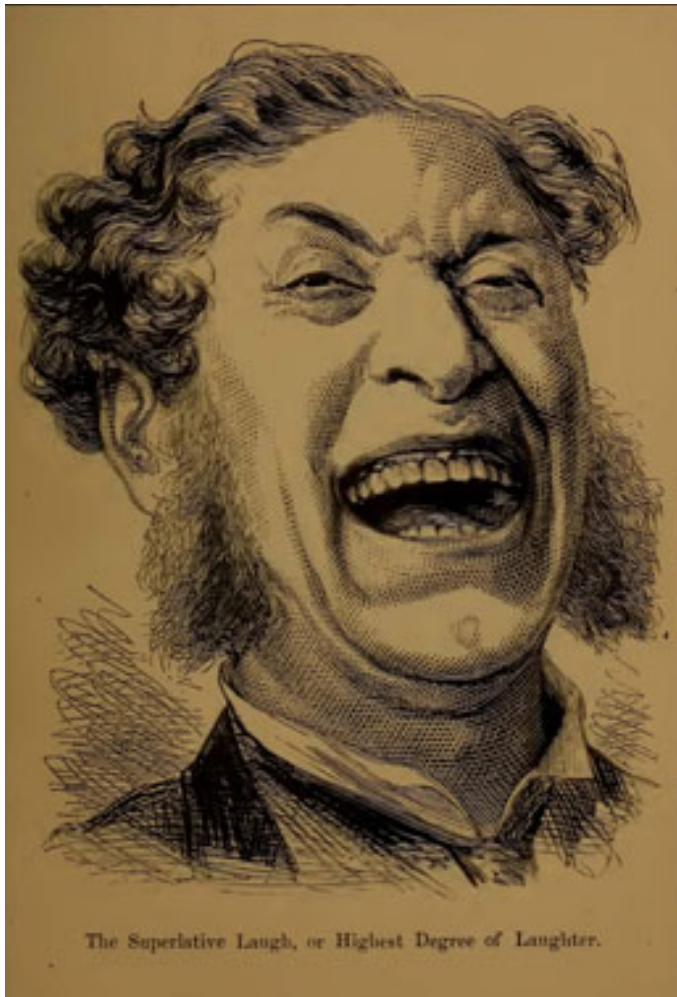


FIGURE 7.2: The Superlative Laugh, or Highest Degree of Laughter, c. 1875 (engraving from *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*). London: J. Burns, 1875, courtesy of Matthew Kaiser.

than a few seconds” and “apoplexy ensues” (1875: 41). Laughter-inducing entertainment, Vasey notes, once “regarded as a rare luxury,” “is now looked upon as an absolute necessary of life” (1875: 25). His words are supplemented with illustrations of faces distorted by laughter. In one, a plump matron, slack-jawed and grinning, flashes missing teeth; in another, a mirthful gentleman loses facial control and, with it, his dignity. For all his zeal, Vasey’s tone is defeatist. He concedes that “the opinions which I have ventured to advance are . . . diametrically opposed to those which are universally entertained on the subject,” and that “an immense majority of the inhabitants of most civilised countries hold the habit of laughing in . . . high estimation” (1875: ix–x, 23). “Indeed,” he laments, “laughter is generally thought to be so natural, so cheerful, so convivial, so exhilarating, nay, even so healthy, that the monitorial proverb of ‘laugh and grow fat’ has become as ‘familiar in our mouths as household words’” (1875: 26). Health warnings about laughter only produce more laughter. “If we think we must not laugh,” William Hazlitt observed, “this perverse impediment makes our temptation to laugh the greater” (1819: 11). So associated is laughter with health and sociality by the mid-to-late nineteenth century, that Ralph Waldo Emerson concludes his essay “The Comic” (1875) with a quip about the healing fellowship of laughter:

When Carlini was convulsing Naples with laughter, a patient waited on a physician in that city, to obtain some remedy for excessive melancholy, which was rapidly consuming his life. The physician endeavored to cheer his spirits, and advised him to go to the theatre and see Carlini. He replied, “I am Carlini.”

—1876: 154

Laughter’s salutary reputation predates, of course, the nineteenth century. The Old Testament includes one of the earliest references to laughter therapy: “A merry heart doeth good *like* a medicine: but a broken spirit drieth the bones” (Prov. 17:22). Following ancient Greek physicians Hippocrates and Galen, early-modern doctors “encouraged the cultivation,” Andrew Stott recounts, “of a sense of humour as a defence against illness and depression” (2005: 175). In *Treatise on Laughter* (1579), French physician Laurent Joubert examines instances of “unhealthy and bastard laughter,” when “one pisses and shits,” for example, “from laughing” too excitedly (1980: 77, 64). For all its unfortunate side effects, “there is nothing more marvelous,” Joubert concludes, “than laughter, which God has given to man alone above all the animals because he is the most admirable” (1980: 65). In 1621, Robert Burton includes laughter among the symptoms of the “disease of melancholy,” but it is *manic* laughter that worries him, when people are “extraordinarily merry,” “laughing” “beyond all measure” (1986: 92, 257). And let’s not forget the word

“humor.” It has a juicy past. Daniel Wickberg reminds us that medieval “humoral theory . . . defined physiology in terms of a temperament (from the Latin for ‘mixture’) created by the relative proportions of the four humors—blood, phlegm, choler or bile, and melancholy or black bile—in the body” (1998: 17). “Humorous” originally referred to an “odd or quirky temperament suggested by an imbalance of the humors” (1998: 18). Thus, laughter and health, like humor and medicine, have been conceptually coupled in the Western imagination since antiquity.

That said, a paradigm shift occurred in the nineteenth century. Scientific and medical discoveries—the Lamarckian theory of biological inheritance, the Darwinian theory of evolution, the rise of modern brain science, and, with it, somatic theories of selfhood—fundamentally changed the way that people conceived of and experienced their bodies and minds, hence the relationship between laughter and health. Nineteenth-century neurology painted a simultaneously astonishing and disenchanting portrait of the mind as *embodied*. “We know now that we do not see with the eyes or hear with the ears,” Oscar Wilde remarked in 1897, for “it is in the brain that the poppy is red, that the apple is odorous, that the skylark sings” (2005: 118). Traditionalists feared that biological determinism had reduced human beings to physiological machines devoid of free will: cellular networks of nervous energy engaged reflexively in autocorrection and self-regulation. “It would be a pity if science,” G.K. Chesterton sighed, “by performing the most brilliant operations on the brain, should end up removing the brain altogether” (1991: 190). In 1860, Victorian philosopher-biologist Herbert Spencer, an early proponent of the embodied mind as well as of the “relief theory” of laughter, explained the existence of laughter in purely functionalist terms as a means by which the nervous system discharges “liberated nerve-force” “through the motor nerves to various classes of the muscles” (1860: 400, 397), in order to diffuse pent-up energy. In the wake of the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859), human life was again radically redefined in provocatively biological terms. By century’s end, it was generally understood that humans were—to quote surgeon George Crile—“changing, modifiable organism[s],” the biological products of twenty thousand millennia of natural selection and mutation, of adaptation to an ever-changing environment, the “chief mechanism of adaptation” being “the brain” (1916: 36). Biologists and psychologists plumbed the depths of laughter for its evolutionary payoff, for its “utility in the life of the organism,” the “muscular reflex” of laughter existing “on the same basis,” in their eyes, as “the webbed foot of an amphibian or the teeth of a carnivore” (Crile 1916: 44). If “disease” constitutes “the failure of the organism to adapt itself completely” (1916: 1), then the laugh-impulse, like any other anatomical adaptation, must protect and optimize the species in some way, aid humanity in its struggle for survival.

From the 1870s through the 1930s, scientific and philosophical studies of laughter focused primarily on how laughter improves the health or advances the evolutionary interests of the human race. The study of laughter, in the Age of Empire, was subsumed in the science of eugenics, in the normative logic of race- or population-improvement. The eugenic foundations of turn-of-the-century theories of laughter, and of contemporaneous philosophies of comedy, can be traced to two interoperable phenomena: first, to the biologization (or neurologization) of the laugh-impulse, with laughter increasingly viewed as nervous reflex, rather than as character trait; and second, to its racialization, its reformulation as a problem of *population*, of what Michel Foucault has called the “species body” (1978: 139). Eugenics flourishes conceptually “at the juncture of the ‘body’ and the ‘population,’” where the body is a synecdoche for population, and where “the life of the body” and “the life of the species” blur in our minds (1978: 147, 139). At its core, eugenics is a politicization and idealization of health: a utopian and iatric impulse to engineer—socially, genetically, and environmentally, through selective breeding and habitat-improvement—a “healthier,” more hygienic, human race. In eugenics, life is subordinate to an ideal of life; the present is subordinate to a telos of life. Eugenists were an ideologically diverse lot; they included fascists, feminists, conservationists, Marxists, racists, and middle-class parents. In his 1904 lecture “Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims,” Galton spoke frankly of his political agenda. With improved “health, energy, ability,” and “manliness,” he prophesied, “we”—and by “we” he meant the ruling classes of the Western powers—“should be better fitted to fulfil our vast imperial opportunities” (2004: 37–8). In late-nineteenth-century Britain, eugenic proposals to incentivize sexual reproduction among the fit and to discourage it among the so-called feeble-minded and differently abled “never left the realm of theory,” writes Nicholas Wade (2014: 33), though, in the early twentieth century, many nations, including the United States, Japan, Germany, Sweden, and Canada, sterilized citizens deemed “unfit” without their consent and adopted eugenics-based immigration policies. But the *rhetoric* of eugenics, Marouf Hasian contends, was ubiquitous at the turn of the century (1996: 25–30). In Britain, it shaped late-Victorian and Edwardian debates about poverty and the welfare state, women’s rights, child care, mental illness, crime, industrial pollution, and the elimination of “race poisons,” such as alcohol and tobacco (Hasian 1996: 28). To those in denial, Chesterton could only shout: “The Eugenic State has begun” (1987: 307).

This brings us to Anthony Ludovici’s *The Secret of Laughter* (1932) and to his bared-teeth theory of the laugh-impulse, a theory, unfortunately, that has received scant critical attention. It is unfortunate, not because Ludovici’s book has scholarly or scientific merit, but because it is the starkest, most gobsmacking, example of how the science of eugenics informs and shapes early-twentieth-century theories of laughter. An antifeminist philosopher, an outspoken British

eugenist, and, for a time in the 1930s, a Nazi sympathizer, Ludovici was the author of such right-wing treatises as *A Defence of Aristocracy* (1915), *Jews, and the Jews of England* (1938), *The Four Pillars of Health* (1945), and *Enemies of Women: The Origins in Outline of Anglo-Saxon Feminism* (1948). Inspired by Hobbes's "superiority theory" of laughter, Ludovici fixates on a passing observation in Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), namely, "that in laughing, we *show teeth*" (1932: 69). Ludovici hypothesizes that human laughter evolved from the animal "display of teeth, or fangs," as a means of asserting dominance, of making "a claim of superior adaptation" (1932: 70). He turns his attention, queasily, to the dystopian landscape of 1930s England: "This is a decadent age," he asserts, an era of economic and cultural decline, of "physical inferiority" and "hidden debility," when "millions . . . are acutely deranged mentally, or severely disordered physically" (1932: 110). He quotes approvingly "Mr. C.J. Bond," a likeminded thinker and member of the Medical Consultative Council of the Ministry of Health, who warns policy-makers that "we . . . are heading, not for national well-being, but for racial decay," the inevitable result, Ludovici adds, of "all this human rubbish," the "diseased children and adults," "weighing down the sound and the healthy" (1932: 111). As weakness sprouts, weed-like, around him, Ludovici notices a corresponding upsurge in laughter, a "hypergelastic" (1932: 106) tone to popular culture. Why this "frenzied modern exaltation of humour," he wonders, this "insistence on showing teeth at all costs" (1932: 110, 104)? Ludovici acknowledges that the laughter is "neuroasthenic and morbid"; it sounds "sinister" (1932: 113, 17). But it is "not . . . necessarily bad" (1932: 17), for it is also the sound, he realizes, of biological instinct awkwardly reasserting itself, refusing to subordinate itself to the conformist forces of twentieth-century life. In this era of "inferiority," only the "crown of laughter" can inspire "the feelings of a king" (1932: 113). If the British take an inordinate amount of pleasure in laughing, or in "baring their teeth," at perceived inferiors, buffoons, defectives, and weaklings, it is because, unconsciously, they are raging, Ludovici argues, against Britain's postwar egalitarianism, against the unnatural leveling of society, against this "age of humiliations" (1932: 111). Laughter is a reflexive means by which the "species body" protests the unhealthy state of modern civilization.

The idea that comedy functions as a social or moral corrective, a means of restoring order to a discordant or alienating world, and of punishing people who stray from or threaten the norm, is an ancient one. Ludovici complicates this Aristotelean idea by pathologizing sociality. It is social man, he insists, not the egoist, who is the unnatural one. Ludovici traces the laugh-impulse to our simian genes, severing it conceptually from the herd instinct, redefining comedy as a *biological* corrective to comity, to the disease of communitarianism. Behind our teeth, our inner ape wages war against our inner sheep. Rather than a

fascistic outlier, or eccentric Nietzschean reading of Darwin, Ludovici's *The Secret of Laughter* is best understood as a paradigmatic expression of the eugenic logic intrinsic to late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century theories of laughter. What follows is an account of how laughter became subsumed in modern ideologies of health and racial fitness, and how canonical theories of laughter and comedy—those of George Meredith, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, and George Bernard Shaw—were shaped, subtly and overtly, by the science of eugenics.

HEAD-BUMPS AND MONKEY TICKLES

In seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century Western Europe, philosophical debates about the nature of laughter were informed by the moral concerns, ideological priorities, and partisan allegiances of ruling-class political philosophers. Is laughter polite? Does laughter undermine the social order? At the conclusion of the English Civil War in 1651, Thomas Hobbes denounced laughter as selfish and antisocial. Laughter, he warned, surveying the political wreckage, tears at the fabric of society and unleashes our basest instincts. In 1709, in the wake of the Acts of Union and the creation of the Kingdom of Great Britain, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third Earl of Shaftesbury, sought to redeem laughter—morally and politically—by linking it to sympathy and concord. Laughter, or more specifically, *reserved* laughter, has the power, he suggested, to ease social tensions and to neutralize destructive and unreasonable impulses. Laughter might even serve as antidote to tyranny and social constraint, to the “Awe” inspired in the masses by the ruling classes, by the “Magisterial Voice and High Strain of the Pedagogue” (Cooper 1709: 22). A leveling force, laughter nurtures intellectual freedom and civility, for “without Wit and Humour,” Shaftesbury argued, “*Reason* can hardly have its Proof, or be distinguish’d” (1709: 22).

By the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, in the mid-eighteenth century, a new and decidedly cerebral theory of laughter had emerged in response to the changing cultural and socioeconomic landscape, to the *embourgeoisement* of Western society. Richard Simon explains how “the prevailing definitions of the comic shifted from arguments about superiority . . . and sympathy . . . to arguments about incongruity,” to the notion that the laugh-impulse is an “essential attribute” (1985: 17) of human consciousness, a feature of cognition, rather than a violent or genial emotion, and that laughter occurs reflexively when our minds are confronted with discrepancy and contradiction. The middle-class proponents of the “incongruity theory” viewed laughter as a symptom of humanity’s inborn rationality, of the mind’s ability to detect inconsistency. In plucking the laugh-impulse from the slough of emotion and depositing it on the peak of pure cognition, Enlightenment philosophy

“defang[ed]” it, Wickberg claims, on behalf of “a new urbane and cosmopolitan style of politeness in a world grown increasingly commercial and ‘middle class’” (1998: 56). From roughly 1725 to 1850, the incongruity theory reigned supreme in laughter studies. Its advocates included Francis Hutcheson, James Beattie, Alexander Gerard, Immanuel Kant, Jean Paul Richter, Sydney Smith, William Hazlitt, and Søren Kierkegaard, among others.

“The essence of the laughable,” Hazlitt declared in 1819, “is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another,” for “Man . . . is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be” (1819: 6–7, 1). Railing against the ghost of Hobbes, Samuel Taylor Coleridge informed his nephew Henry: “To resolve laughter into an expression of contempt is contrary to fact, and laughable enough,” for laughter, he insisted in 1833, is an expression of “surprise at perceiving any thing out of its usual place, when the unusualness is not accompanied by a sense of serious danger” (1854: 485). Even Arthur Schopenhauer, a boisterously anti-rationalist voice in Western philosophy, jumped on the incongruity bandwagon. *The World as Will and Idea* (1819) contains what Michael Billig calls a “bloodlessly cognitive” (2005: 83) analysis of laughter, which Schopenhauer defined à la mode as “the expression” of “the sudden perception of . . . incongruity” (1909: 95). Not every proponent of the incongruity theory was necessarily pro-laughter, nor was it a universally accepted fact that the detection of incongruity is a cognitive feat deserving of praise. In a lecture in the early 1820s, German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel conceded that, yes, people laugh reflexively at “contrast” and “contradiction”; they even laugh, he remarked with disdain, at “things of the profoundest importance,” so long as they “happen to notice some entirely unimportant feature, which may conflict with habit and ordinary experience” (1920: 301–2). For this reason, Hegel refused to attribute philosophical weight to laughter, let alone credit it with producing “a hale condition of the soul,” for “laughter,” he declared, is “little more than an expression of self-satisfied shrewdness,” a “sign” that the laugher has “sufficient wit to recognize . . . contrast” and is “aware of the fact” (1920: 302). Some nineteenth-century cultural critics resisted the allure of the incongruity theory. Baudelaire remained a devout Hobbesian well into the 1850s. Still others opted for synthesis and hybridity. In 1847, English poet and essayist Leigh Hunt attempted to reconcile, in Romantic fashion, passion and cognition, weaving together the wandering strands of the superiority, sympathy, and incongruity theories: “We triumph, not insolently but congenially, . . . in proportion to the vivacity of the surprise,” which is “partly physical as well as mental,” as when we “dash[] against some pleasant friend round a corner” (1847: 7).

Let’s return, for a moment, to that word “bloodlessly.” A cognitive theory of laughter is not the same thing, of course, as a discorporate or purely intellective

one. The fact is, even as theories of laughter were becoming, after 1725, increasingly cognitive, less concerned with classifying laughter as a good or bad bodily passion, after 1800, and especially from the late 1820s onward, theories of cognition were becoming increasingly neurophysiological. By the mid-nineteenth century, the brain had displaced the Enlightenment mind in the popular imagination as the seat of consciousness. Blood was rushing back to laughter. The biologization of cognition coincided with key cultural-intellectual events in the West: the popularization of phrenology and craniology in Western Europe and North America in the 1820s and 1830s; the establishment of neurology as a medical field and the emergence of the “radical . . . concept of cortical localization” (Finger 1994: 32); and, more generally, the rapid spread of biological-deterministic explanations of human behavior, including the theory of natural selection. “Without a sound physiology of the nervous system,” German physician and phrenologist Johann Gaspar Spurzheim declared, “there can be neither psychology nor any species of philosophy,” for, “in determining the nervous functions,” “physicians . . . render the greatest service to philosophers, moralists, teachers, judges, and legislators” (1838: 17). William Cohen chronicles the “pervasive” influence of “bodily materialism” (2009: 6) on Victorian high and popular culture, and how “intangible human qualities like consciousness and selfhood” were reconceived—to the alarm of traditionalists—as “somatic conditions” (2009: 3). By mid-century, the study of laughter had entered the brave “new world of the engineer and the scientist” (Billig 2005: 90). Philosophical treatises and theological meditations on the cultural or ethical value of laughter deferred to science, or made a feint of doing so, buttressing their epistemological authority and relevance by conceiving of laughter in functionalist or evolutionary terms, or by embracing ideologies of health and fitness, or by adjusting their rhetoric to echo the scientific materialism and neurophysiological reductionism of the day. The results were sometimes clumsy. The popular Boston-based lecturer Edwin Whipple evoked images of head wounds when he informed his audience that humor “is the very juice of the mind, oozing from the brain, and enriching and fertilizing wherever it falls” (1849: 91). Coleridge sharpened his aforementioned critique of Hobbes on the grindstone of neuroscience: “Laughter is a convulsion of the nerves; and it seems as if nature cut short the rapid thrill of pleasure on the nerves by a sudden convulsion of them, to prevent the sensation becoming painful” (1854: 485). In *Poetry, Comedy, and Duty* (1888), Charles Everett, a professor of theology, traced “the ‘he, he’ of the fool” and “the ‘haw, haw’ of the clown” to “a vibratory movement among certain corpuscles of the brain” (1888: 213). Although Baudelaire’s metaphor of laughter as demonic possession—a “monstrous” “mark[] of Satan” (1972: 145)—smacks of magical thinking, he made sure to couch it in the rhetoric of psychiatry, asking “what clearer sign of debility could there be than a nervous convulsion, an involuntary spasm” (1972: 146).

The philosophical campaign to conquer laughter epistemically, to discover its “truth,” was joined in the nineteenth century by powerful scientific combatants: neurologists, who mapped the motor and sensory nerve systems activated in laughter; psychiatrists, who attempted to determine whether types of laughter were expressive of healthy or pathological mental states; phrenologists, who sought to identify the organ or organs responsible for humor and wit in the cerebral cortex; and evolutionary psychologists and biologists, who hoped to explain how and why the “species body” laughs. In the mid-1820s, Scottish neurologist Charles Bell discovered the “distinct” neuroanatomical “machinery” “affected during the paroxysm of laughter,” claiming that laughter could not be traced, as “physiologists” in “former times” believed, “to a nerve called the sympathetic” in the spinal cord, but “arises” instead “from that system of nerves, which, from their great office, I have called *respiratory*” (1893: 135). On the psychiatric front, Henry Maudsley ranked “types or kinds of laughter” (1902: 331) based on the mental fitness of the people inclined to them. His taxonomy included unhealthy “mechanical” laughter, “nervous spasms expressing nothing,” “risible contorsions,” and a range of healthy laughs: “the shrill crow, the jerky cachinnation, the long-drawn whoop, the bow-wow, and others, all which without doubt,” he stated, “have their special mental meanings” (1902: 331). He portrayed laughter as a pre-conscious language: a subverbal message from the body communicating the state of its health and fitness to live. The eugenic violence implicit in Maudsley’s project rears its head on occasion. The “best laughter,” he declared, “being the graceful expression of a fine harmony of nature, will be musical,” while the most pathological laugh is “so piercingly grating,” he confessed, “as almost to provoke and excuse an assault on the performer” (1902: 331–2).

While advances in neurology and psychiatry shaped, in subtle ways, nineteenth-century popular views on laughter, according to Robert Martin, “some of the most spirited discussion of comic theory” and laughter “came out of one of the obscure but not unimportant intellectual offshoots of the period, the new ‘science’ of phrenology” (1974: 47). Martin understates the case. As Stanley Finger points out, Franz Joseph Gall, the founder of phrenology, was an “outstanding anatomist” (1994: 32) and influential proponent of cortical localization. Phrenology and neurology were, at the time, overlapping, cross-pollinating, disciplines. John Collins Warren, an American neurologist and pioneer in surgical anesthesia, established a research program in Boston to study phrenology, after hearing Gall lecture in Paris. Spurzheim complained that the “opponents” of phrenology “ridicule” it as pseudoscience, as the study of “bumps” or cranial protuberances (1838: 125). Ambrose Bierce, for instance, defined phrenology as “the science of picking the pocket through the scalp” (2011: 579). Bumps and pockets aside, phrenology inspired a middle-class craze for all things neuroanatomical, opening the floodgates to bodily

materialism. Gall and his acolytes studied plaster casts of “the heads of individuals remarkable for qualities, whether talents or moral sentiments” (Spurzheim 1838: 97), such as benevolence, amateness, and inquisitiveness, in order to determine the location in the cerebral cortex whence those qualities originated. The more developed and pronounced those cortical organs were, Gall hypothesized, the more “influence” they would have “on the directions in which bony matter is to be deposited to form the skull” (Spurzheim 1838: 109). Thus, “those who write like Voltaire, Rabelais, Prion, Sterne, Rabener, Wieland, and all who are fond of jest, raillery, ridicule, irony and comical conceptions, have the upper and outer parts of the forehead, immediately before the organ of ideality, of considerable size” (1838: 239). Gall traced Laurence Sterne’s comic genius to Organ 20, an area of the brain, George Combe explained, behind “the anterior-superior-lateral parts of the forehead” (1851: 319). Despite its obvious shortcomings as a theory of mind, phrenology is significant, in the history of laughter, for two reasons. First, it popularized the notion that the laugh-impulse is a neurophysiological phenomenon, for cranioscopy attracted a large middle-class following, including trendsetters Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Second, phrenology reframed seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical debates about the nature of laughter as disputes over neuroanatomy. Phrenologists disagreed which part of the cerebral cortex houses the capacity for humor, as well as whether the faculty of wit is a lower sentiment or a higher intellectual power. The philosophical battle over the meaning of laughter became a scuffle over cortical territory.

Gall originally dubbed Organ 20 the “Organ of Wit.” Spurzheim renamed it the “Organ of Mirthfulness.” Gall viewed the faculty as “an intellectual power” (Spurzheim 1838: 239). Echoing Shaftesbury, Spurzheim considered it “affective”: “a sentiment which disposes men to view everything in a gay, joyful and mirthful manner” (1838: 240). In 1827, phrenologist William Scott challenged both Gall and Spurzheim, proposing a new “theory of laughter” (1827: 230) in the *Phrenological Journal*, a theory that looked a lot like the incongruity theory dressed up as brain science—with a dash of Hobbes thrown in for good measure. The laugh-impulse, Scott argued, cannot be traced to any one organ; instead, it is a “sort of tickling of the faculties which causes laughter,” “a contrariety of emotion, a kind of jarring, however slight, between the propensities and sentiments, or between one of the lower propensities and *another* whose function is higher” (1827: 233). To Scott, laughter is a neurophysiological response to two or more organs contradicting each other, or cortically cross-talking. Scott was the first phrenologist to claim that Organ 7, the “Organ of Secretiveness,” “is often greatly concerned in producing laughter” (1827: 233), suggesting that the laugh-impulse is linked, at least in part, to roguishness, to a childish desire to make mischief for others. Spurzheim complimented Scott on his “well elaborated article,” but pointed out that



FIGURE 7.3: A nineteenth-century phrenologist mapping a boy's scalp, n.d.
Photo by Hulton Deutsch / Getty Images.

aligning the laugh-impulse with the perception of “incongruity” fails to account for the fact that “we may laugh heartily at a single object, without allusion to any difference” (1838: 241), or the fact that the perception of difference is a feature of other cognitive faculties.

As the century progressed, phrenological explanations of laughter became increasingly decentered. In 1851, Combe declared that “laughter, like crying, may arise from a variety of faculties”: “I am acquainted with a boy,” he explained, “in whom [the Organ of] Acquisitiveness is large, and he laughs

when one gives him a penny” (1851: 319). When Organ 20 is “large,” Combe added, and “is combined with much Combateness [Organ 6] and Destructiveness [Organ 1], it leads to satire” (1851: 331). Following the appearance of Scott’s essay, the journal published a lengthy response from a disgruntled subscriber and amateur phrenologist, identified only by the initials “X.T.P.H.,” who expressed irritation at the conflation of the laugh-impulse with the perception of incongruity. Citing his own crude research, he explained that a neighbor or family member, “a person with whom we happen to be well acquainted,” possesses a “large and prominent organ of Comparison” but “a strongly-marked deficiency . . . of Wit” (1827: 366). X.T.P.H. went on to suggest that a “separate organ” be discovered in the brain, “the ludicrous,” but worried that “there appears to be no place so appropriate for it” (1827: 377), for so crowded had the phrenological map become.

Three decades later, the philosophical debate over the meaning of laughter played out in another dispute over neurophysiology, this time between Victorian polymaths Alexander Bain and Herbert Spencer. Both men viewed laughter mechanistically as tension-relief, a means by which the nervous system manages energy flow and achieves homeostasis. Inspired by Kantian incongruity theory, Bain floated the idea in 1847 that an “outburst of laughter is nature’s provision for relieving an incompatibility of mental and bodily states” (quoted in Simon 1985: 189), before abandoning the logic of incongruity altogether in 1859, arguing instead that “Laughter is connected with . . . a sudden Release from a state of constraint” (Bain 1865: 250). “Dignified, solemn, and stately” situations, he explained, “require in us a certain posture of rigid constraint” (1865: 250). Laughter occurs when that constraint is removed, and the nervous system regains its limberness and balance. In laughter, the body rises above the seriousness, or mental strain, imposed on it from without. Bain’s new theory contains a distant echo of the Hobbesian idea that, in laughter, one rises above weakness, feeling superior to it.

In his groundbreaking essay “The Physiology of Laughter” (1860), Spencer dismissed as “insufficient” Bain’s contention that “laughter is a result of the pleasure we take in escaping from the restraint of grave feeling” (1860: 399). Flexing his superior knowledge of anatomy, Spencer reminded his readers that “the nervous system in general discharges itself on the muscular system in general,” for “liberated nerve-force,” such as the emotion of fear, “must generate an equivalent manifestation of force somewhere,” usually in the “motor nerves, and so cause muscular contractions” (1860: 395–7). The human nervous system adapted, Spencer suggested, to expend energy and better achieve homeostasis; any inhibition of or impediment to nervous expenditure results in repression or the unhealthy retention of nervous energy. Laughter occurs when our bodies have been primed to expend a “large mass of” nervous energy but that energy is “suddenly checked in its flow” (1860: 399–400), only

to be released through side channels as surplus energy—for example, when the presiding judge at a trial clears her throat to deliver the verdict, causing spectators in the courtroom to grow tense with anticipation, but she hiccups instead, triggering reflexive laughter in her audience. Laughter results from what Spencer calls “a descending incongruity,” that is, “when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small” (1860: 400). Laughter is the body’s managerial and hygienic means of discharging excess nervous energy generated in anticipation of an event requiring a greater amount of nervous attention. Spencer’s theory of laughter biologizes capitalist efficiency and middle-class practicality. Laughter keeps the body in working order. Equally notable is the fact that Spencer is among the first theorists of laughter to trace the laugh-impulse to *unconscious* cognitive processes.

Unfortunately, Darwin did not offer a theory of the adaptive function of laughter. In his only sustained discussion of the laugh-impulse, which occurs in

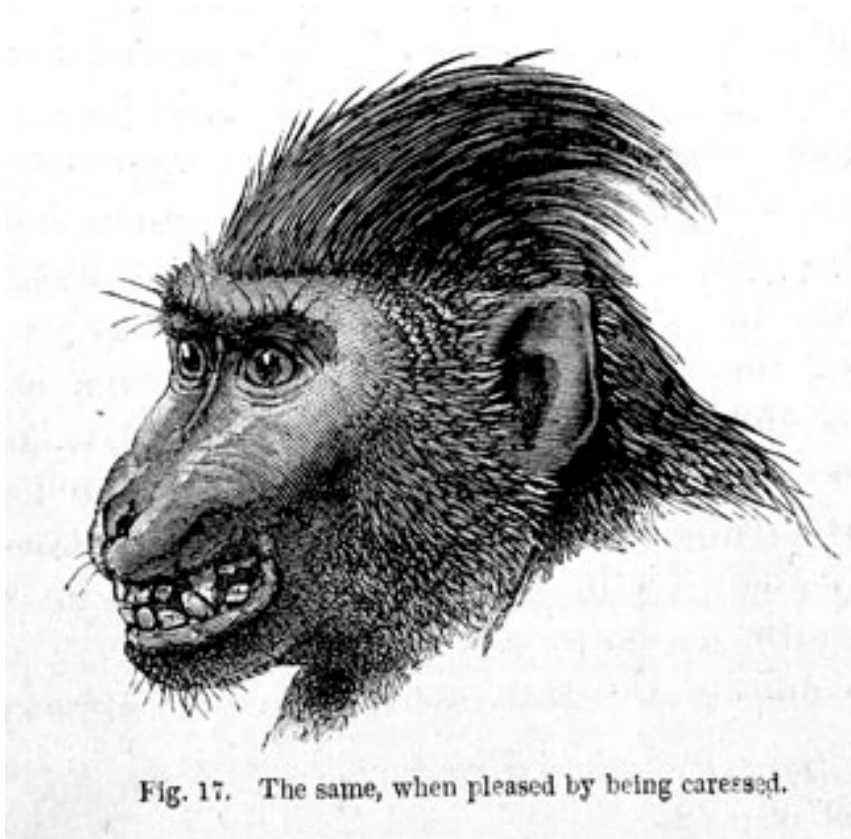


FIGURE 7.4: A pleased monkey in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, 1872. Wikimedia Commons.

The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (1872), he defined laughter somewhat flimsily as “the expression of mere joy or happiness” (1990: 135). Citing both Bain and Spencer, he suggested that “something incongruous or unaccountable, exciting surprise and some sense of superiority in the laugher, who must be in a happy frame of mind, seems to be the commonest cause” (1990: 135–6). He focused, instead, on exploring similarities between human and simian expressions of joy: “The imagination is sometimes said to be tickled by a ludicrous idea,” he explained, “and this so-called tickling of the mind is curiously analogous with that of the body,” for the “anthropoid apes . . . utter a reiterated sound, corresponding with our laughter, when they are tickled, especially under the armpits” (1990: 137). He noted that, just as “the corners of the mouth are retracted and the upper lip raised during ordinary laughter,” open mouths and “quivering” jaws are “expressive of a pleased state of mind in various kinds of monkeys” (1990: 141–2).

If Darwin shied away from explaining how the laugh-impulse benefits the species, the generation of evolutionary biologists and psychologists who followed him did not. They seized on his fleeting reference to monkey tickles. In 1897, eugenists Granville Stanley Hall and Arthur Allin argued that laughter constitutes “an atavistic reverberation” (1897: 25) of the collective unconscious. In laughter, “the mind, as it were, falls back through unnumbered millennia and catches a glimpse of that primeval paradise where joy was intense and supreme, and where life and the joy of living were both inconceivably vivid” (1897: 8). The evolutionary roots of laughter can be traced, they posited, to the screams of excitement elicited by tickling. Because “primitive organisms had only the sense of touch,” “these minimal touch excitations thus represent the very oldest stratum of psychic life in the soul” (1897: 12). Sensitive skin meant survival, for it alerted our ancestors to the “insect world” and to parasites that “have always infested the skin” (1897: 12). George Crile, too, embraced the notion that “the laughter excited by tickling is a substitute for the motor act of defense against injury” (1916: 330). As to *why* laughter manifests itself as spasms in the “expiratory muscles” and diaphragm, Crile could only conjecture: “Were laughter expressed with the hands only, arboreal man might have fallen from the tree; and if expressed by the feet, our equilibrium might be lost” (1916: 335). In 1902, British psychologist James Sully joined the tickle fray, suggesting that the play-impulse, which he regarded as coterminous with laughter, may have its origins in “a sort of game of sham-fight” “among young animals” (1902: 179). He hypothesized that humor, the ability to laugh at one’s environment, to turn “the world into a plaything,” may be an adaptive mechanism with unique benefits to the weaker members of the group, for, in making fun of the world, “they have found a world worth coming back to” (1902: 408). Neuroscientists and evolutionary biologists continue to hunt for the origins of laughter. In the late 1990s, V.S. Ramachandran proposed the

“false alarm theory” of humor, which is reminiscent of Bain’s escape-from-gravity theory of laughter: “I suggest that the main purpose of laughter might be to allow the individual to alert others in the social group (usually kin) that the detected anomaly is trivial, nothing to worry about” (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998: 206).

Let’s return, however, to 1902 and to Sully’s remarkable assertion that humor might function as an adaptive mechanism enabling “the survival of the unfit” (1902: 408). The claim stands in stark contrast to the eugenic theories of laughter that shaped the field, a fact Sully acknowledges, for the “evolutionist,” he writes, “has accustomed us to the idea of the survival of the socially fit, and the elimination of the socially unfit sort of person” (1902: 408). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is the social Darwinist, the champion of health and racial fitness, who captures the imagination of the philosopher of laughter—and who does so “with that creepy simplicity of mind,” Chesterton remarks, “with which the Eugenists chill the blood” (1987: 300–1). Thus, “laughter,” Guy Theodore Wrench proclaims, “is self-preservative,” an indication “of successful adaptation” (1908: 67). Greig cites the British psychologist and eugenicist William McDougall, who argues, in anticipation of Ludovici, “that laughter has been evolved in the human race as an antidote to sympathy, or a protective reaction shielding us from the depressive influence of the shortcomings of our fellow-men” (1923: 276). Carus hears in laughter only biological triumph: “the loud announcement of a victory” (1898: 261). Theologian Charles Everett embraces with open arms “the principles of natural selection” (1888: 213), declaring “the descendants of the man who laughed alone endured, to form the race of man that laughs,” while the weak “dwindled and passed away” (1888: 215).

MEREDITH, BERGSON, FREUD, AND SHAW

Although “eugenics” was not yet a household word in the 1870s, its logic had begun to insinuate its way into aspects of everyday life, shaping, subtly and overtly, Western culture. By century’s end, eugenics was an essential ingredient of modern consciousness. The extent of its impact on people’s lives, however, is difficult to fathom, so entangled is it in ideologies of health and hygiene, as well as in contemporaneous views on heredity. We see eugenics when it bares its teeth in violent and discriminatory policy or statements, but, most of the time, its expressions seem benign, even genial: a doctor’s friendly advice to a patient; plans for a municipal daycare center; an anti-smoking campaign. In George Meredith’s *An Essay on Comedy* (1877), eugenics takes the form of a celebration of the “healing” power of laughter (1905: 37). Magda Romanska and Alan Ackerman have said of Meredith’s theory of comedy, it “is not anarchic or revolutionary, but therapeutic” (2017: 187). Eugenics is a *therapeutic*

politics. Since antiquity, comedians have sought to mend a world they perceive as broken or corrupt. Meredith, too, seeks to cure an ailing society with comedic laughter. But couched in his banal analysis of comic theater from Aristophanes to Congreve is a therapeutic claim unprecedented in the history of comedic theory.

Meredith attributes to comedy, or to “the Comic spirit” as he calls it, the power to remedy the “social inequality of the sexes” (1905: 13, 8). Comedy accomplishes this political feat by modifying human biology ontogenetically and phylogenetically, spurring the development of a superior breed of enlightened human, thus an end to patriarchy. Never had comedy been asked to perform such a herculean task. First, comedy rehabilitates the human nervous system, “kindl[ing] the mind through laughter” and restoring “sanity” and “sound sense” to our bodies (1905: 8, 88, 28). “The comic idea floods the brain,” Meredith insists, “like reassuring daylight” (1905: 93). Next, comedy breaks down mental and cultural barriers between men and women, which results in greater agency and understanding, and, eventually, in a healthier, more “sound,” human race (1905: 37). “The Comic poet,” Meredith writes, “dares to show us men and women coming to this mutual likeness; he is for saying that when they draw together in social life their minds grow liker” (1905: 30). Meredith encourages “cultivated women to recognize that the Comic Muse is one of their best friends” (1905: 60). Comedy facilitates natural selection, acting as feminist midwife at the birth of an intellectually superior race, for the “Comic poet” requires a “society of cultivated men and women” with “quick” “perceptions” and mental “acuteness” (1905: 7–8). Susceptibility to the “Comic spirit” eventually becomes a hereditary trait. In contrast to the fiery Fabian eugenics of George Bernard Shaw, who called for “a eugenic religion to save our civilization” (1904: 21), Meredith’s bourgeois-feminist eugenics is milk-warm and sentimental. His language is so airy and euphemistic, that the world he seeks to repair can seem unreal. Rereading *An Essay on Comedy* on its twentieth anniversary, Shaw complained that its author “knows more about plays than about playgoers” (1922: 223), that Meredith is oblivious to the material conditions of modern life, the plight of flesh-and-blood men and women. Given his progressive views on sexuality, however, Meredith was respected in many eugenist circles. When he was publicly excoriated in 1904 for proposing “leasehold”—or trial—marriages (Parnell 1907: 183), *The American Journal of Eugenics* came to his defense, accusing his critics of being unscientific.

Meredith credits the “silvery laughter” (1905: 90) of comedy with curing two pathologies: puritanism and barbarism, which he considers afflictions of the brain as well as cultural disorders. Puritanism and barbarism have weakened the body, sapped British culture of its strength and debilitated the race. “Sensitiveness to the comic laugh,” Meredith writes, “is a step in civilization”

(1905: 93–4). Civilization is synonymous with cognitive improvement and racial advancement. Who are these backward puritans and barbarians, these sick and insensitive men, in need of the healing powers of comic laughter? The puritans, or social conservatives, Meredith calls “agelasts,” or “non-laughers”: “laughter-hating” “men who are in that respect as dead bodies” (1905: 9). Their antipathy to laughter is no quirk of character. It is a neurological condition. When we are “disdainful,” Meredith explains, or feel “contempt,” “we shut the brain” (1905: 63). The comic spirit “prod[s] the Puritan nervous system,” reanimates those “dead bodies” (1905: 12) and opens enervated minds. Barbarians, by contrast, are the “giddy” and “feverish” (1905: 8) working-class consumers of mass culture, the great unwashed. Meredith dubs them “hypergelasts,” or “excessive laughers”: men “so loosely put together that a wink will shake them,” for “to laugh at everything is to have no appreciation of the Comic of Comedy” (1905: 10). In eugenist literature, the working classes are often depicted as “savage” or “uncivilized,” as sexually primitive or mentally and physically feeble. In *Efficiency and Empire* (1901), Arnold White bemoaned the proliferation of “street-bred brains” and “premature and reckless marriage,” which leads “to the multiplication of tainted brains and rickety frames” (1901: 97). Angelique Richardson provides a compelling account of the “rational reproduction” movement in late-Victorian feminism and of how “eugenic feminists” promoted women’s liberation as the key to “a new healthy race,” hence to a revitalized “British empire” (2003: 26). *An Essay on Comedy* anticipates eugenic feminism. Meredith pathologizes working-class men and foreign men of color in the name of rational reproduction, or, as he puts it, “draw[ing] together in social life,” comparing Britain’s own “feverish” “barbarians” to women-oppressing “Arabs” (1905: 59). The raucous laughter of London’s East End mingles in his essay with images of the Orient:

Eastward you have total silence of Comedy among a people intensely susceptible to laughter, as the Arabian Nights will testify. Where the veil is over women’s faces, you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic spirit is driven to the gutters of grossness to slake its thirst.

—1905: 59

“There has been fun in Bagdad,” Meredith acknowledges, “but there will never be civilization where Comedy is not possible,” where “social equality of the sexes” does not exist (1905: 60).

The belief that comedy has the capacity to improve *racial* health predates the nineteenth century, as does the claim that comedy can help manage populations *biologically*. In “A Discourse upon Comedy” (1702), Irish playwright George Farquhar turned to humoral medicine for evidence of the remedial effects of

comedy, saying of the people of the British Isles: "As we are a mixture of many nations, so we have the most unaccountable medley of humors among us of any people upon earth; these humors produce variety of follies, some of 'em unknown to former ages" (1918: 222). It is the pedagogic and therapeutic duty of the comedic playwright, he insisted, to quell these "new distempers" (1918: 222) or humoral disorders. While Farquhar's theory of comedy contains kernels of proto-eugenic logic, his paternalistic proposal to tranquilize temperamental audiences by bringing their multicultural humors into balance looks innocuous next to Meredith's bioengineering aspirations, his vision of a master race of healthy laughers. Managing the bodily passions of an ethnically diverse population, after all, is not equivalent to shaping a future population genetically. For Meredith, comedy "improve[s]"—to repurpose Galton's words—"the inborn qualities of a race" and "develop[s] them to the utmost advantage" (2004: 35). Look to the union, Meredith proclaims, of the witty man and the witty woman, for therein lies the salvation of the human race.

It is a long way from Meredith's feminism to Ludovici's fascism. In 1877, optimistic Meredith hears in comic laughter a "silvery" spur to natural selection, the march of civilization. In 1932, pessimistic Ludovici sees in laughter a silverback's fangs: a primeval protest against a sick modern world. For all their tonal and political differences, both theories are cut from the same eugenic cloth. By the 1890s, theories of laughter had turned decisively against civilization as a political ideal, against the romance of cultural progress, rejecting the supposition that natural selection and modern society are confluent phenomena, or that modernity is a healthy or natural state. By the time Queen Victoria was lowered into the family crypt at Windsor Castle in 1901, comedy had lost its empire. Laughter remained a potent medicine, only now civilization—alienating, prohibitive, disenchanting—was the "disease," to quote Shaw (1963c: 741), rather than an antidote to barbarism or anarchy. A new consensus had emerged in laughter studies: modern subjectivity *hurts*. Civilization is intrinsically unhealthy.

Turn-of-the-century theorists of laughter can be divided into two groups. In the first, we have thinkers like Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud, who viewed laughter as pain-relief, a momentary release from the suffering caused by the contradictory or impossible demands of modern civilization. "What we call our civilization," Freud claimed, "is largely responsible for our misery" (1961: 38). Laughter helps us manage the chronic pain of existence. More often than not, we are not conscious of the therapeutic work it performs. Shaw belongs to the second group: those who viewed laughter as a radical and experimental cure, a world-shattering tool, a vehicle of ideological critique. Modern civilization could be laughed away. A healthy world was possible, only it had to be forged in the furnace of revolution or rediscovered in atavism and neo-primitivism. In 1903, Shaw announced that a healthy society would entail reengineering the

human race: “We must . . . give up the notion that Man as he exists is capable of net progress” (1963c: 713). “The bubble of Heredity,” he noted, “has been pricked” (1963a: 503).

It would be a stretch—and a bit unfair—to classify Bergson and Freud as eugenic thinkers. At the same time, their theories of laughter are not exactly *anti-eugenic*. Let’s call them “eugenic adjacent.” They were conceived in the eugenic milieu of turn-of-the-century laughter studies and are structured by the same middle-class ideologies of health and hygiene. Even as Bergson and Freud reject the most pernicious aspects of eugenic thought, its ideal of racial progress, they are imaginatively constrained by the normative and therapeutic assumption that laughter plays an adaptive role in social and psychic life. Targets of antisemitic animus, both men understood the dangers of racial utopianism and hereditary reductionism. The evolutionary psychologist Granville Stanley Hall, an avowed white supremacist, whose eugenic theory of tickling is cited above, bemoaned the influence on European culture of “rapacious Jews” (1881: 54), denouncing psychoanalysis as immoral, even after he hosted Freud at Clark University in 1909. Bergson’s daughter Jeanne was differently abled, a deaf person. Billig hypothesizes that “the priority given to the visual over the verbal” (2005: 135) in Bergson’s theory of laughter might be attributable, at least in part, to the “quietness” (2005: 137) that marked his domestic life, as well as to his sensitivity to matters of neurodiversity. Philosophically, Bergson is a paradox. His theory of mind, in particular his understanding of time and memory, is heavily indebted to Darwinian evolutionism, as well as to neuroscience and materialist psychology. Even so, his philosophy is anti-material and quasi-dualistic in nature. As Gilles Deleuze notes, Bergson rejected biological-deterministic models of cognition as “illusions that overwhelm us” (1991: 23). Bergson insisted that “the world of spirit, or the intangible force of life, has equal reality” (Billig 2005: 129). He attempted, therefore, to synthesize spirit and matter, idealism and realism, advocating for “an existence placed halfway between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’” (Bergson 1991: 9). Equally fraught is Freud’s relationship with the materialist psychology of his day. He began his career studying nerve cells. As late as 1895, he was promoting psychoanalysis, Peter Gay recounts, as a “psychology for neurologists,” before challenging “the prevailing materialist consensus” with respect to degeneration-based etiologies of neuroses and so-called sexual perversions (1988: 122–3). By 1905, Freud was “criticiz[ing] his fellow psychiatrists for assigning far too much importance to heredity” (Gay 1988: 123). Despite their racial pluralism, despite Bergson’s anti-materialism, despite Freud’s rejection of hereditarianism, both men clung to a functionalist understanding of laughter as autocorrection, as a momentary attempt by society or by the individual psyche to return to a more natural state, in the face of the sickening impact of civilization. They have this in common with Ludovici.

The modern world described by Bergson in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900)—a world of soulless automata, mechanical bodies, and klutzes—is the world bequeathed to us by nineteenth-century neurology and evolutionary psychology, by any system of knowledge that reduces human life to its material elements. It is a world devoid of spirit, elegance, mystery, and intuition: a world of awkward bodies trapped in their own materiality. Awkward bodies are inherently funny. Thus, the modern world rings with rip-roaring, side-splitting laughter. This laughter enables us to endure civilization. Our laughter, however, is not the sympathetic laughter of Shaftesbury; nor is it the polite and erudite laughter of Hutcheson or Hazlitt. Bergsonian laughter is morphine-cold. Its effect is to desensitize us: “To produce the whole of its effect, . . . the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart” (Bergson 1999: 11). It numbs us to the plight of all those awkward bodies, protects us from our impulse to empathize with them, “for laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (1999: 10). Bergsonian laughter, then, is *cruel*, but not in the Hobbesian sense of being antisocial or misanthropic. On the contrary, it is social and humane. “Laughter is always the laughter of a group,” Bergson contends, and its target is always the *inhuman* (1999: 11). Laughter is never directed at people’s humanity, at “the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being” (1999: 15). Rather, we laugh at their lack of humanity, their unnaturalness, their “*mechanical inelasticity*” and “*rigidity*,” their “absentmindedness” and “automatism” (1999: 15, 14, 20). We laugh at the material elements of civilization that have congealed around and crushed their human spontaneity. We laugh at “[s]omething *mechanical encrusted on the living*” (1999: 39). Laughter has a disciplinary, as well as a self-protective, function. It informs the laughed-at: Beware your inhuman qualities! Become self-aware! Rejoin human society!

This is Charlie Chaplin’s message in the film *Modern Times* (1936), in which he plays a clownish assembly-line worker caught in the cogs of a factory belt-conveyor system. The more he becomes the machine he operates, the more laughable he appears. So conditioned by mechanical repetition is Chaplin’s character to the act of bolt-fastening, that he reflexively applies his wrench to anything bolt-like, to noses and nipples, at one point, chasing a buxom matron down the street. We laugh at people trapped in routine or reflex or autopilot. Modern civilization, Bergson contends, has purged “the living body” of its “gracefulness and suppleness” (1999: 49); the result is the “artificial *mechanization* of the human body” (1999: 48). Civilization has ensnared us all. No one is safe. One minute we laugh, the next, we are laughed at. Laughter does not *cure* us of the disease of civilization. It merely acts as numbing agent, “anesthesia,” to use Bergson’s medical term, making life momentarily bearable. Because we are social creatures, our impulse is always to connect with and relate to others. It is imperative, therefore, that we cultivate through comedy a

social defense against the inhuman and machinic qualities of others, lest we find ourselves identifying with automatons, becoming machines ourselves.

Ludovici responded to Bergson by baring his teeth, dismissing the latter's "earnest attempt" at a theory of laughter as "wholly inadequate" (1932: 36–7). Particularly ridiculous, in Ludovici's eyes, was Bergson's equation of the laugh-impulse with sociality, the idea that laughter constitutes "a form of social ragging," a "weapon against anti-social or eccentric conduct" (1932: 38). Laughter, Ludovici insisted, is *antisocial*. It is animalistic and sinister. In flashing our simian fangs, threatening to bite, we communicate biological superiority, distinguish ourselves from the sickly herd. Bergson's and Ludovici's theories *do* overlap, however, insofar as both depict laughter as a means of "Othering" "unnatural" persons, those who embody the perversity of modern civilization. Both Bergson and Ludovici present laughter, too, as cathartic, as fleeting relief from a grotesque and unhealthy world from which there appears no escape. Where Bergson traces the source of pathology to materialism and mechanization, Ludovici traces it to racial degeneration. Like Meredith, both view laughter as therapeutic. Unlike Meredith, however, their impulse is to quarantine the infected rather than to cure civilization, which is beyond salvation. Poor civilization. By the turn of the century, a gaggle of doctors had gathered at the foot of its bed, arguing in stage whispers and shaking their heads.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud claims that the problem with civilization is soap, or rather, all that soap represents: cleanliness, safety, order, self-consciousness, the discipline of the body, the "replacement of the power of the individual by the power of a community" (1961: 49). Civilization turns us into bars of lavender-scented repression. Frustration, self-alienation, unfulfilled desire: these are the costs of collective life. Norbert Elias makes a similar point. What we call "self-control," he argues, is the violence of pre-civilization *internalized*, "the battlefield" having "moved within": "Part of the tensions and passions that were earlier directly released in the struggle of man against man, must now be worked out within the human being" (2000: 375). It's enough, Freud mutters, to make us all neurotic: "A person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals" (1961: 39). Modern civilization—this "much-despised era of scientific and technical advances" (1961: 40), this soapy nightmare—not only *hurts*, worse, it presents itself as the only acceptable remedy for the hurt it causes. Civilization is disease and failed cure: "If there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice" (1961: 40–1). Modern life is a vicious circle of frustration-anesthetization, unhappiness followed by "refined methods of narcotization" (1961: 41), which, in turn, spawn more unhappiness, as our senses are numbed, our instincts thrust deeper into the unconscious. As society becomes more complex, we become increasingly

disembodied, self-alienated, more oblivious to the internal sources of our suffering. We disappear—a part of us does, our unwashed face—behind a shiny mask of civilization. Sooner or later, however, the unconscious demands relief. Call it the revenge of dirty thoughts.

Laughter causes cracks to appear on the mask of civilization. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud maps these laugh lines, explores the unconscious world behind them. Freud included many jokes in his book. For our purposes, one will suffice: a “remarkable” specimen of misogynous “smut” from an Austrian jest-book (Freud 1960: 92, 115). “A wife is like an umbrella,” Freud writes: “Sooner or later one takes a cab” (1960: 92). To understand how “tendentious” (1960: 118) jokes like this one work, Freud dusts off Spencer’s theory of laughter as the discharge of surplus nervous energy. Of particular interest to Freud is Spencer’s emphasis on the *unconscious* mechanics of laughter, his claim that laughter results “when consciousness is unawares transferred from great things to small” (Spencer 1860: 400). Freud “modif[ies]” (1960: 180) the theory, arguing that it is not, as Spencer claimed, random surplus energy “discharged by laughter,” but “energy used for . . . inhibition” (1960: 182), for the repression of sexual, violent, antisocial, exhibitionistic, or childish impulses. Where Spencer attributed laughter to the removal of an *external* obstacle, when an anticipated major event becomes minor, Freud attributes laughter to the evasion or overcoming of an *internal* obstacle, to “the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way” (1960: 120). Laughter is an expression of conscious pleasure at overriding the internalized voice of civilization, at catching the forces of repression unawares, thus enabling unconscious sexual instinct to escape through cracks in our mask: “A *preconscious thought* is given over for a moment to unconscious revision and the outcome of this is at once grasped by conscious perception” (1960: 205). Take the “umbrella” joke. Because we do not typically associate extramarital sex with the act of hailing a cab in the rain, we do not have a psychic mechanism in place, embarrassment or shame, to block or diffuse the antisocial instinct activated by the joke’s novel association of umbrellas with spouses, taxis with prostitutes, and rainstorms with lust. Freudian laughter is a mischievous force, “an awakening of the infantile” (1960: 279), an imp bouncing on the membrane between our conscious and unconscious lives. But that does not make it a revolutionary force. For all its dirtiness, Freudian laughter is just as hygienic as its Spencerian cousin. Both Freud and Spencer conceive of laughter as a means by which psyches or nervous systems, respectively, discharge pent-up energy, self-regulate, manage discomfort, and achieve balance. Freudian laughter might protect us from civilization by alleviating our suffering, but it also protects civilization from us. In providing temporary relief from suffering, laughter normalizes suffering, tempers frustration that might otherwise be directed at the social

institutions responsible for repression. In a sense, Freudian laughter inoculates civilization against chaos. The court jester may be friendlier than the executioner, but both are on the tyrant's payroll.

Of all the philosophers of laughter in the Age of Empire, none had a more ambitious plan for laughter than the figure with whom we conclude this history: Irish playwright and political activist George Bernard Shaw. Pain relief? Bosh! Bourgeois feminism? Poppycock! Shaw sought to unleash laughter's radical potential. To that end, he made laughter a cornerstone of his utopian plan to eradicate civilization as we know it and to replace it with a post-capitalist society populated by superhumans: "The only fundamental and possible Socialism is the socialization of the selective breeding of Man: in other terms, of human evolution" (1963c: 724). "We must eliminate the Yahoo," Shaw argued, "replace the man by the superman" (1963c: 723–4): "a goodlooking philosopher-athlete, with a handsome healthy woman for this mate" (1963c: 692). Shaw floated the idea of establishing a "human stud farm" (1963c: 726) for the purpose of "eugenic breeding" (1904: 22). On May 16, 1904, at a conference on eugenics in London, at which Galton himself was keynote speaker, Shaw revisited the stud-farm idea, causing attendees to squirm: "What we need is freedom for people who have never seen each other before, and never intend to see one another again, to produce children under certain definite public conditions, without loss of honor" (1904: 22). What role, exactly, does *laughter* play in Shaw's bioengineering fantasy? A central role, for Shaw viewed comedy as an indispensable weapon—the only effective cultural weapon—against the "true" enemy of the Revolution: "British common sense" (1922: 224). Turning Aristotle on his head, Shaw claimed comedy is "nothing less than the destruction of old-established morals," the shaming of the old order by radical upstarts (1922: 227). Comedic laughter cuts through "prejudices and stupidities" (1922: 225), the false consciousness of the middle classes. The "function of comedy," then, "is to dispel such unconsciousness by turning the searchlight of the keenest moral and intellectual analysis right on to it" (1922: 224). Shaw likened the "anti-comedic common sense" of the middle classes, their lies, to disease, noting that "the patients have 'common sense' enough not to want to be cured," for "they realize the immense commercial advantage of keeping their ideal life and their practical business life in two separate conscience-tight compartments" (1922: 226).

There are two stages to Shaw's laughter revolution. First comes the destruction of the old order. Laughter plays a starring role. Laughter frees our minds from the prison of illusion. It exposes civilization's warts, highlighting the "tragi-comic . . . conflict between real life and the romantic imagination," the contradiction and hypocrisy that structure modern culture (1963b: 299). Laughter is ideological critique at its most authentic and fleshy, for laughter *materializes* the world, reconnects us with our own bodily materiality. Once

civilization is laughed away, next comes the sex, the Revolution's second stage. Our bodies liberated, our feet grounded in material reality, we are able finally to make "change that is real," "subduing Nature" (1963c: 691) through eugenic breeding, revolutionizing human biology. Why is "real" change synonymous with sex? Shaw anticipates the question. The only significant structural changes that have occurred in the history of the world, he argues, are the changes wrought by selective breeding: "the changes from the crab apple to the pippin, from the wolf and fox to the house dog" (1963c: 691). "And what can be done with a wolf can be done with a man," he reminds us. Political and philosophical revolutions, by contrast, no matter how transformative they might appear—the change "from serfdom to capitalism, from monarchy to republicanism, from polytheism to monotheism"—are "but changes from Tweedledum to Tweedledee" (1963c: 691).

Shaw's 1903 play *Man and Superman* ends with a two-word stage direction: "*Universal laughter*" (1963a: 686). From actors to audience to theater rafters, it is Shaw's cosmic call to arms, a political big bang, a reverberant cry for rebirth. From that kernel of laughter, the Revolution grows. From laughter, the Superman. The history of laughter is not pretty. Its ugliest chapter is the one that concerns us here: the dozen or so decades spanning the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this age of eugenics, Shaw stands out. He was not the first to view laughter through the therapeutic lens of eugenics. By the 1890s, the study of laughter was subsumed in the science of eugenics. Shaw was the first *eugenicist*, however, to view eugenics through a lens of laughter. The result is no joke.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Ethics

Dickensian Satire and Mealtimes Shame

ROB JACKLOSKY AND MATTHEW KAISER

Victorian fans of Charles Dickens affectionately referred to him as the “Founder of the Feast” after his ironical use of the phrase in *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Toasting his absent employer, Bob Cratchit raises his glass: “I’ll give you Mr. Scrooge, the Founder of the Feast!” (2009: 53). A “reddening” Mrs. Cratchit retorts, “Founder of the Feast indeed!” (2009: 53). A generous host, Dickens feeds the literary appetites of his middle-class readers. At the same time, however, he points a satirical finger at the very logic of consumption that structures middle-class identity in nineteenth-century Britain, where food scarcity and plenty walk hand-in-hand. Like so many of the hungry characters who appear in his novels, especially the downwardly mobile ones, Dickens was sensitive to the politics of famine, as well as to the psychology of dinner-table misery. Food is central to Dickens’s ethical critique of consumerism, individualism, and socioeconomic inequality, thus to his vision of literature. Consider his well-documented fascination with bacon—with the metaphor of bacon and with the dish. In *Oliver Twist* (1837), Dickens compares melodramatic theater to “streaky bacon”; in melodramas, “the tragic and comic scenes” appear in “regular alternation, as the layers of red and white in a side of streaky bacon” (1992c: 118). Dickens acknowledges that the tragicomic plots of melodramas can “appear absurd” (1992c: 118). He nevertheless finds the blending of comedy and tragedy delicious—and ethically enlightening. It is no coincidence, then, that comedy and tragedy intermix, in Dickens’s own works, in satirical scenes involving food: in socially awkward meals and in food-related

shame. In fact, like melodrama, Dickens's unique brand of satire has a distinctly bacony flavor.

Humorist and short story writer Steve Almond suggests that comedy is "powered by a determined confrontation with a set of feeling states that are essentially tragic in nature: grief, shame, disappointment, physical discomfort, anxiety" (2014: 92). In his characters' traumatic but amusing encounters with food—whether gruel, porridge, brimstone and treacle, bread, or bacon—Dickens examines the ingredients of his own middle-class subjectivity: anxiety, self-loathing, and class-based shame. In *Great Expectations* (1861), Pip confesses: "It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home" (1992a: 100). For Dickens, the most "shameful place" was also domestic: his memories of his emotionally and financially tumultuous childhood and his adult resentment of it (Kaplan 1988: 17–58; Tomalin 2011: 3–50). Dickensian class consciousness, therefore, often manifests itself in tragicomic representations of tableside shame and fear of deprivation. Early in his career, Dickens derided the dining habits and food-related self-consciousness of others. As he matures as a writer, Dickens bends his satire inward toward self-reflection and, ultimately, self-critique.

Dickensian satire does not exist in a vacuum, of course, nor is Dickens's ethical universe shaped solely by his childhood experiences. As we shall see, the satirical tradition that preceded and inspired Dickens contains whiffs of bacon too, in particular the works of the eighteenth-century Irish essayist and cleric Jonathan Swift. It is imperative that we situate Dickensian satire in relation to that tradition, in order to appreciate how Dickens introduced a new, deeply personal and more humane element to satire's ethical thrust, transforming satire in the process, his work becoming increasingly metapsychological and inward-directed. Whereas the typical "satiric persona," Roger Henkle notes, is coldblooded and impersonal, and "contemplates his scene with barren detachment" (1980: 133), Dickensian satire, especially after 1842, functions as a vehicle for confession and psychological self-revelation, blending societal exposure with therapeutic self-exposure. Even in his early comic works, Dickens cannot shut his heart completely to the failings of others, nor can he "stare down the horror of the anarchic, degenerated City life," or "condemn the weak" (Henkle 1980: 133–4). Dickens's sentimental comedy, Robert Martin argues, is predicated upon a belief that the humorist must cultivate "an identification between perceiver and perceived" (1974: 29). So kind, in fact, is Dickens toward the objects of his critique, that some critics consider him more "a writer of the comic mode," than a satirist *per se* (Henkle 1980: 134). Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope disagreed. Dismissing Dickens as "Mr. Popular Sentiment" (1991: 147), he complained that the former was too quick to ridicule, especially the rich. "We get on now with a lighter step," Trollope sighed, referring to what he perceived as Dickens's shallowness as a social critic: "Ridicule is found to be more convincing than argument, imaginary agonies

touch more than true sorrows, and monthly novels convince, when learned quartos fail to do so" (1991: 147). As the streaky bacon analogy reminds us, however, Dickens enjoyed stylistic contrast. Like those layers of red and white in a side of well-cured bacon, the satiric and comic modes exist side-by-side in Dickens's works, informing each other. Dickens's sentimental approach to satire provides us with a unique perspective on how comedy had the ability to inspire ethical change in the Age of Empire, an age of unprecedented consumption and acquisition.

SATIRE: A GLIMPSE

Dickens's early sketches and novels were written at the tail end of a comedically diverse literary epoch, which was still in thrall to the great humorists and satirists of the eighteenth century. Even as William Makepeace Thackeray distinguished himself from the old masters of comedy, from Swift, Alexander Pope, Oliver Goldsmith, and Henry Fielding, he paid them "an unceasing tribute of applause," referring to them as his "kind friends, teachers, benefactors" (1883: 588). The early-Victorian public had a well-developed taste for satire: the comic mode that exposes folly, hypocrisy, and vice through ridicule. As Henkle reminds us, "Thackeray and Dickens conspicuously began their careers with parodies of writing styles that had become stultified or mannered" (1980: 13). Dickens mocked from the start. Most satire is conservative by nature; it critiques behavioral excesses and moral lapses, in an effort to bring those who might be tempted to transgress cultural norms back into line. "The satirist," Harry Levin writes, "must convince his audience that, when something is rotten or someone goes astray, there has been a departure from a certain ethos" (1987: 197). While normative, satire is nevertheless a hopeful art form, for it presupposes that people—readers of satire—are capable of enlightenment and moral growth. As Swift himself explained in his poem "Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift" (1731), those who read his satires "bought 'em,/ As with a moral view design'd/ To cure the vices of mankind" (2003: 524).

The full title of Swift's most famous satire is *A Modest Proposal For preventing the Children of Poor People from being a Burthen to Their Parents or the Country, and for making them Beneficial to the Publick* (1729). *A Modest Proposal* represents a high-water mark for eighteenth-century Menippean satire, which gets its name from the ancient Greek cynic Menippus of Gadara. Menippean satire is generally written in prose and mixes parody with satire, blending different kinds of comedic discourse in a single work (Suarez 2003: 116; McLuhan 2015: xv). Its target tends to be a prevailing attitude, a cultural ambience or an intellectual trend, rather than a specific person or class of persons. Rhetorically, *A Modest Proposal* imitates, Dustin Griffin notes, the "impersonal and heartless" (1994: 104) tone and structure of contemporary

political pamphlets. In particular, Swift parodies the “carefully reasoned consecutive argument” (Griffin 1994: 140) of pamphlets published by social “projectors” (or social planners), who offered simple rationalist solutions to complex societal problems. With the cold-bloodedness of a logician, Swift proposes that the Irish eat human babies as an expedient way to solve problems of hunger and overpopulation. Listing the advantages of baby-meat to pork, Swift declares:

MANY other Advantages might be enumerated: For Instance, . . . The Propagation of *Swine’s Flesh*, and Improvement in the Art of making good *Bacon*, so much wanted among us by the great Destruction of *Pigs*, too frequent at our Tables, which are no way comparable in Taste, or Magnificence, to a well-grown, fat Yearling Child, which roasted whole will make a considerable Figure at a *Lord Mayor’s Feast*, or any other Publick Entertainment.

—1730: 18

Swift’s satirical invocation of swine resonated with Dickens. As we shall see, pigs and the eating of children haunt Dickens’s own writings, especially around issues of shame and class consciousness. Satire’s preoccupation with food makes sense, as Griffin, quoting Lord Byron, explains: “If ‘eating makes us feel our mortality’ and is at the same time essential to life, then it is not surprising that satirists have fastened on it as a central image of what makes us human, and as an image too of the relationship between satirist and reader” (1994: 197). Matthew Bevis draws a connection between themes of “hunger and hate” in traditional satire, suggesting that “the satirist-as-cannibal may himself hunger to hate” (2013: 80). Satire seeks to reform not its targets, but its readers, or consumers, and the focus on the act of eating, or consuming, is a way to prompt them to reflect on their fate. Pigs don’t think twice, after all, about what *they* internalize. Before you swallow, Dickens reminds his reader, study your trough! In his travel narrative *American Notes* (1842), Dickens marvels at the fact that the streets of New York teem with swine: “Two portly sows are trotting up behind the carriage, and a select party of half-a-dozen gentleman hogs have just now turned the corner” (1987: 86). Dickens was not the first European traveler in the New World to complain of the pigs. In *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), Frances Trollope calculated “the chances were five hundred to one against” crossing the street “without brushing by a snout fresh dripping” (1974: 80). In Dickens’s America, however, the boundary between human and pig is more porous. He compares a “roaming” pig—who spots “a slaughtered friend” at “a butcher’s door-post”—to “a great philosopher,” who “grunts out ‘Such is life: all flesh pork!’” before burying “his nose in the mire again” (1987: 86–7). The comparison is suggestive. Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy, which



FIGURE 8.1: J. J. Grandville, “A young rabbit refusing the advances of a pig-prostitute,” in *Les métamorphoses du jour*, 1829. Photo by DEA / ICAS94 / Getty Images.

posits that all human behavior is motivated by the pursuit of pleasure, was denounced as “Pig Philosophy” by Victorian cultural critic Thomas Carlyle (1898: 315). To many early-Victorian writers, including Dickens and Carlyle, the Benthamite perspective “offered,” Jane Nardin suggests, “no better ideal for mankind than a lifelong wallow in sensual delights” (1996: 37).

Satire requires a stance of moral superiority. As Matthew Hodgart explains, “true satire demands a high degree both of commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world, and simultaneously a high degree of abstraction from the world” (2010: 11). Hodgart notes that aggression is implicit in most satire, and sometimes even a sense of contempt on the part of the satirist. The satirist’s targets might include entire literary genres or specific literary or cultural texts. Satire only works, of course, if its audience recognizes the target. With its satirically unambiguous title, Fielding’s *Shamela* (1741) alerts readers before they turn the first page that its target is Samuel Richardson’s novel *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), in which a sixteen-year-old servant girl resists the advances of her rich employer. On the title page of *Shamela*, these words appear: “In which, the many notorious FALSEHOODS and

MISREPRESENTATIONS of a Book called PAMELA, are exposed and refuted; and all the matchless ARTS of that young Politician, set in a true and just Light" (1741: title page). Satirists optimistically hope, on the one hand, to change behavior, even as they cynically acknowledge, on the other hand, the difficulty of doing so. In his "Preface" to *The Battle of the Books* (1704), Swift lamented: "Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own; which is the chief reason for that kind of reception it meets in the world, and that so very few are offended with it" (2003: 1). One wonders whether Swift wrote his satirical masterpieces *A Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) because he hoped to change behavior or because he despaired of doing so. Because it is committed to exposing vice, folly, and hypocrisy, satire is necessarily didactic and medicinal. Its ideological aim, after all, is to purge culture of poisonous or alien elements. Satire is an acquired taste, flourishing in certain literary epochs. Sensitive or polite readers may find its coldness, its desire to incite opprobrium, misanthropic. Thackeray confessed that "I should like to have been Shakespeare's shoeblick—just to have lived in his house, just to have worshipped him," or to have been companion to Fielding, Goldsmith, or Samuel Johnson (1883: 384). But Swift? That's a different matter, Thackeray muses, for "he would have bullied, scorned, and insulted you," and perhaps "written a foul epigram about you" (1883: 385). Along with Pope and John Gay, Swift founded the "Scriblerus Club," the mission of which was to satirize the superficiality and capriciousness of the trend-obsessed ruling class. Swift's politics and temperament are at odds with Dickens's, for the latter sought, not always successfully, to see the good in humanity.

THE SQUIGGLE ON THE EDGE OF THE PAGE

At first blush, Dickens's earliest satirical work, *Sketches by Boz*, which was published in installments between 1833 and 1836, appears to be in the vein of satire that one sees in humor magazines of the period or shortly thereafter, such as *Punch*, which published Douglas Jerrold's popular satire *Mrs. Caudle's Curtain Lectures* in 1845. While many of Dickens's sketches are somber or wistful in nature, and not satirical at all, others contain flashes of Swift or Fielding. Dickens's tone verges at times on the censorious. One sees it in his energetic line of attack, his moralistic engagement with social issues, and his focus on characterological types. Dickens traffics, too, in tropes from the eighteenth-century comedy of manners. In "Horatio Sparkins" (1834) and "The Tuggses at Ramsgate" (1836), for instance, his targets are the pretensions of the nouveau riche and the cutthroat nature of the middle-class marriage market, with its false lovers and jilted women. *Sketches* is a veritable encyclopedia of satiric styles. On occasion, it invokes Restoration comedy's cuckolds and

dupes. At times, Dickens is positively Fieldingesque in his assault on hypocrisy or in his portraits of rascality.

But even in these early sketches, one detects notes of empathy. The failings and foibles of others come across as endearing. No one in Dickens's universe is totally irredeemable. From the start, Dickens appears to have taken a gentler, more humane, approach to satire, even as he mocks the world around him. As a literary mode, satire might necessitate cynicism and moral discipline, but Dickens's execution of it exudes joy and conviviality. His sketches abound with word-play and rhetorical excess; they toy with—and frustrate—moral expectations. As critics have noted, there is a roundness and a dynamism to the targets of Dickens's satire. G.K. Chesterton puts his finger on it: "There is something in these stories which there is not in the ordinary stock comedy of that day: an indefinite flavor of emphasis and richness, a hint as of the infinity of fun" (2008: 6). Writing in 1940, at the height of war, George Orwell marvels that Dickens can stare into the heart of misery, but still manage his "unmistakable Dickens touch, the thing nobody else would have thought of," "something totally unnecessary": "the florid little squiggle on the edge of the page" (1968: 451). That squiggle on the edge of the page is the root, Orwell intuitively, of Dickensian comedy, hence of his humanity as a writer.

That squiggle is often enough the squiggle at the end of a pig, or, in *American Notes*, the collective squiggles of a community of swine, of "city scavengers" roaming the streets, making an appearance at nearly every dinner (Dickens 1987: 87). Pork is surprisingly ubiquitous in Dickens's works. It is as irrepressible, in fact, as the decapitated head of King Charles I in the thoughts of insane Mr. Dick in *David Copperfield* (1849–50). Despite Mr. Dick's best efforts "for upwards of ten years" to write a "Memorial" to "the Lord Chancellor, or the Lord Somebody or other," the "allegorical" head of the dead king worms its way into his book as *idée fixe*, becoming an unruly symptom of his "great disturbance" or mental "illness" (1991: 205). Likewise, pigs have an uncanny way of forcing their way both traumatically and comically into Dickens's texts. Shame returns repeatedly at table, often in the form of a four-footed squeaker. The jarring nature of these porcine intrusions might suggest—to psychoanalytically inclined readers—an unconscious pattern or an association of which Dickens himself (like Mr. Dick) is unaware. Pigs are traditionally associated in the West with shamelessness, squalor, and uncontrollable appetite. Dickens frequently introduces pigs into his plots at moments of painful self-awareness or self-pity, when middle-class or upwardly mobile characters feel most ashamed of themselves or experience humiliation. Dickens might be suggesting that shame—satire's bread and butter—has ethical and political limitations as a corrective mechanism. In other words, the problem with middle-class subjectivity is not a dearth of shame but a superfluity: excessive self-consciousness with respect to status and rank, an inordinate fear of transgression,

a porcine quickness to swallow the norms of one's class or social group. As Pip reminds us, it is excessive shame that ruins people; it is shame that leads to self-alienation. The shaming tactics of traditional satire might not be enough, Dickens suggests, in a normative middle-class world that is structured by shame. Thus, Dickens introduces into modern satire something novel: the tragicomic spectacle of characters ashamed of their shame.

In Dickens, meals are socially and psychologically fraught events. The consumption of food is often awkward, and sometimes traumatic, especially if it involves pig, which invariably gets weaponized. Dickens's porcine approach to comedy does not begin and end, then, with streaky bacon. In fact, a pig makes an appearance in his very first sketch, "Mr. Minns and his Cousin" (1833) (initially titled "A Dinner at Poplar Walk"), in which the persnickety Minns is terrorized by an unwelcome breakfast guest, his boorish cousin Budden. What is the instrument of torture? It is the ham:

"Don't you think you'd like the ham better," interrupted Minns, "if you cut it the other way?" He saw, with feelings which it is impossible to describe, that his visitor was cutting or rather maiming the ham, in utter violation of all established rules.

"No, thank ye," returned Budden, with the most barbarous indifference to crime, "I prefer it this way, it eats short."

—1994: 309

This unpleasant breakfast leads to an unbearable dinner (at Poplar Walk) from which Minns bolts, making his three-hour way home without benefit of carriage, "cold, wet, and miserable" (1994: 315). Oscar Wilde and P.G. Wodehouse will travel this well-trodden path—uncomfortable meals with unwanted guests—in their drawing-room farces.

Even before the potato famine of the Hungry Forties and the Corn-Law-induced food shortages, food scarcity is never far from Dickens's mind. He was not alone. Laura Berry describes the "endless stories of starvation and spoilage reprinted in the London *Times*, which betrayed a nervous interest in what, and how much, paupers ate" (1999: 48). Dickens channels popular anxiety about food in his representations of institutions of social engineering: schools and workhouses. In *Oliver Twist*, readers are invited to laugh at the self-important beadle Mr. Bumble, only to be reminded that they are laughing at child abuse and food insecurity. Oliver's famous request for more gruel—"Please, Sir, I want some more" (1992c: 12)—occurs in the context of starvation and the threat of cannibalism. Moments before Oliver makes his request, which constitutes his first conscious act of self-assertion in the novel, a companion hints "darkly" that "unless he had another basin of gruel *per diem*, he was afraid he might some night happen to eat the boy who slept next to him, who



FIGURE 8.2: George Cruikshank, “Oliver asking for More,” *Oliver Twist*, 1837. Photo by Time Life Pictures / Getty Images.

happened to be a weakly youth of tender age” (1992c: 12). Dickens’s career-long “attraction of repulsion” (Slater 2009: 381) toward cannibalism was particularly pronounced after 1854, when it was discovered that the surviving mariners of the Franklin Expedition to the Arctic had resorted to cannibalism. Writing to his friend William Henry Wills, Dickens confessed: “It has occurred to me that I am rather strong on Voyages and Cannibalism” (quoted in Slater 2009: 381).

Something of a companion scene to the aforementioned passage in *Oliver Twist* can be found in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9). In order to suppress the appetites of the “stunted” and “meagre” (1993: 88) students at Dotheboys Hall, Mrs. Squeers, the schoolmaster’s wife, force-feeds them “brimstone and treacle”

(1993: 86), a combination of sulfur and molasses, a noxious concoction that was thought in the nineteenth century to be a restorative. The medicinal benefits of the substance are of secondary importance, Mrs. Squeers explains, for it “comes cheaper than breakfast and dinner” (1993: 86). With her large “wooden spoon, which might have been originally manufactured for some gigantic top,” she “widened every young gentleman’s mouth considerably,” “they being all obliged, under heavy corporal penalties,” “to be treacled” (1993: 89). This punitive use of food—being “treacled” sounds especially painful—is extended to the “bowl of porridge” that “distended” Nicholas’s “stomach” (1993: 90) rather than filling it. “At one o’clock,” the narrative continues, “the boys, having their appetites thoroughly taken away by stir-about and potatoes, sat down in



FIGURE 8.3: “Phiz” (Hablot Knight Browne), “The Internal Economy of Dotheboys Hall,” *Nicholas Nickleby*, 1839. Photo by Photo 12 / Getty Images.

the kitchen to some hard salt beef” (1993: 92). Mrs. Squeers proceeds to browbeat a boy named Mobbs for “quarrel[ing] with his vittles” and “turn[ing] up his nose at the cow’s liver broth” (1993: 94). *Nicholas Nickleby* reminds readers how the procurement and enjoyment of food are existential matters for many people in industrialized England in the nineteenth century.

Likewise, in *David Copperfield*, David is reduced from middle-class comfort to hunger by capitalism’s caprices, spurred by the sudden death of his father and by his mother’s unlucky remarriage. After biting his new stepfather on the hand, David is sent away to school, where he is forced to wear “a pasteboard placard,” which “bore these words,” “beautifully written”: “*Take care of him. He bites*” (1991: 78). The cannibalistic child who haunted Oliver in the workhouse has been internalized in *David Copperfield* in panoptic fashion as middle-class shame: “I recollect that I positively began to have a dread of myself, as a kind of wild boy who did bite” (1991: 79). Meals are the site of loneliness and outcast communion between David and the impoverished undermaster of the school, Mr. Mell, as they dine together between school terms, Mr. Mell drinking “out of a blue tea-cup, and I out of a tin pot” (1991: 80). The absence of happy food-based community is invariably a signal of domestic trouble. Think of Joe and Pip surreptitiously comparing slices of bread in *Great Expectations*, “silently holding them up to each other’s admiration now and then” (1992a: 8–9).

In *Hard Times* (1854), childhood memories of starvation and of “his old poverty” are points of pride for Josiah Bounderby of Coketown, “a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not” (1992b: 13). “I hadn’t a shoe to my foot,” he brags: “I passed the day in a ditch, and the night in a pigsty” (1992b: 13). Abandoned, he claims, by his mother, he is brought up by his grandmother, who, despite owning “a chandler’s shop” (1992b: 14), starves him. This grandmother, “the wickedest and worst old woman that ever lived,” kept him in “an egg-box” (1992b: 14) and definitely denied him the eggs. She embodies Corn Law England itself. In *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist*, tragicomic scenes or accounts of food scarcity remind readers of the indifference of bureaucracy and of the insular nature of individualism. Bounderby endorses the neglect and abuse to which he was subjected as a child because he “fought through it” (1992b: 14). Of Dickens’s works, *Hard Times* comes closest, after *American Notes*, to a book-length satire on the moral bankruptcy and bootstrap capitalism of the age. With his matter-of-fact narrator, Dickens comes as close as he ever will, in *Hard Times*, to the dispassion demanded of Swiftian satire (Gilmore 2018: 175; Hodgart 2010: 229). Bounderby joins other Dickensian avatars of hypocrisy, complacency, corruption, and venality, such as Lord Verisopht, Podsnap, the Veneerings, and Creakle. So overdrawn is Bounderby, however, “inflated like a balloon, and ready to start” (1992b: 13), that middle-class readers are more likely to recoil from him than see themselves implicated

in his moral failings. As we shall see, Dickens is at his most ethically compelling when he lets go his Menippean urges, turns his satire inward, and when he critiques middle-class subjectivity from within.

IF YOU WANT A SUBJECT, LOOK AT PORK

In *Great Expectations*, a guilt-ridden Pip supplies stolen food—a “savoury pork pie” (1992a: 26)—to a starving convict, who threatens the boy with cannibalization, with having “his heart” and “liver” eaten by a mysterious “young man,” who is only “with great difficulty”—in the words of Magwitch—being held “off of your inside” (1992a: 4). Although he does not know it at the time, Pip’s encounter with Magwitch over the graves of his working-class parents constitutes his traumatic birth into the middle class. Say what you will about Pip, he does not lack in shame. From the start of his narrative, he depicts himself as steeped in shame, in self-alienation, in a self-consciousness that anticipates proleptically his middle-class future. Shame pursues him, or rather, propels him: “I got up and went down-stairs; every board upon the way, and every crack in every board, calling after me, ‘Stop thief!’ and ‘Get up, Mrs. Joe!’” (1992a: 13). Pip’s tragicomic trauma only intensifies when Mr. Wopsle and Uncle Pumblechook, “a well-to-do corn-chandler,” come to dinner: “a superb dinner, consisting of a leg of pickled pork and greens” (1992a: 21, 19). Of course, there is pork. In that famous dinner scene, Pip sits with “a guilty mind,” expecting at every moment “to find a Constable in the kitchen, waiting to take me up” (1992a: 14, 19). “After a short interval of reflection,” Pumblechook introduces into the conversation, to Wopsle’s delight, the topic of the likeness of “Swine” to boys like Pip (1992a: 23). “Look at Pork alone,” Pumblechook declares: “There’s a subject! If you want a subject, look at Pork!”

(“You listen to this,” said my sister to me, in a severe parenthesis.)

“Swine,” pursued Mr. Wopsle, in his deepest voice, and pointing his fork at my blushes, as if he were mentioning my christian name; “Swine were the companions of the prodigal. The gluttony of Swine is put before us, as an example to the young.” (I thought this pretty well in him who had been praising up the pork for being so plump and juicy.) “What is detestable in a pig, is more detestable in a boy.” . . .

“Besides,” said Mr. Pumblechook, turning sharp on me, “think what you’ve got to be grateful for. If you’d been born a Squeaker—”

“He *was*, if ever a child was,” said my sister, most emphatically.

Joe gave me some more gravy.

“Well, but I mean a four-footed Squeaker,” said Mr. Pumblechook. “If you had been born such, would you have been here now? Not you—”

“Unless in that form,” said Mr. Wopsle, nodding towards the dish.

“But I don’t mean in that form, sir,” returned Mr. Pumblechook, who had an objection to being interrupted; “I mean, enjoying himself with his elders and betters, and improving himself with their conversation, and rolling in the lap of luxury. Would he have been doing that? No, he wouldn’t. You would have been disposed of for so many shillings according to the market price of the article, and Dunstable the butcher would have come up to you as you lay in your straw, and he would have whipped you under his left arm, and with his right he would have tucked up his frock to get a penknife from out of his waistcoat-pocket, and he would have shed your blood and had your life.”

—1992a: 23–4

Between Joe’s feeble attempts at consolation and the sermonizing crosstalk of the elders, Dickens captures the frisson of Pip’s humiliation, his fear of exposure, the torture of being eaten by guilt. Pip is simultaneously not guilty of the swinish behavior attributed to him and guiltier than Pumblechook and Wopsle know. Constables might barge in at any moment to arrest him as an accomplice. Pip’s introspective first-person narrative is not conducive to the emotional detachment required of Swiftian satire. Even so, Dickens races, by leaps and bounds, toward Swiftian themes of child/pig slaughter and cannibalism. In Pumblechook’s hands, however, the butchering of children is no demographic abstraction. He concretizes and particularizes the idea; he heaps gratuitous detail upon it. He makes clear that it would be *our* butcher, Dunstable, butchering *you*, Pip, and that he would most likely do it with his “right hand,” while Pip the pig is immobilized “under his left arm.” Perhaps this is what Orwell meant by the “squiggle on the edge of the page.” With Pumblechook, Dickens gestures vaguely towards *A Modest Proposal*. Like Swift, Pumblechook rhetorically substitutes child for pig in order to make a moral point, in order to shame his audience. Arthur Koestler reminds us that animals and themes of animal-for-human substitution feature prominently in satire (1964: 73). According to Koestler, the satirist “magnifies objectionable features in customs and institutions” through the use of animal substitutes or allegories, thereby rendering alien or unnatural “conventions and prejudices which we have unquestioningly accepted, which were tacitly implied in our thinking” (1964: 73). But Pumblechook is no satirist. In fact, the scene underscores the inadequacy of Swiftian didacticism, its ethical limitations in a nineteenth-century context. Pumblechook’s moral lesson widely misses its mark. Swiftian tropes are no help to Pip. His character flaw is not, as Pumblechook lazily assumes, a lack of shame or insolence. Pip is *defined* by shame, tortured by self-consciousness, and, eventually, by class consciousness. Embarrassment is the source of his moral corruption. It warps his psyche, alienates him from those he loves. Pip’s tragic flaw is that he is “ashamed of home.”

JOURNEY TO SHAME

The childhood humiliations suffered by Pip and David, and, to a lesser extent, by the students at Dotheboys Hall, and by all his other fictional children, echo those of Dickens himself: his experience of parental neglect, his father's incarceration for debt at the Marshalsea Prison, his "year as a child labourer" (Tomalin 2011: 29) at the blacking factory, even his education at Wellington House Academy, where "the headmaster"—"a minor sadist of the rod and cane"—"specialized in corporal punishment" (Kaplan 1988: 45). "The tears ran down my face," Dickens informed his friend and future biographer John Forster, referencing his childhood: "I prayed . . . to be lifted out of the humiliation and neglect in which I was" (Forster 1900: 36–7). Dickens is directly implicated, then, in his characters' childhood shame and disgrace. In 1849, as Dickens was preparing to write his semi-autobiographical novel *David Copperfield*, his sister Fanny died, causing "the whole period of his childhood," Peter Ackroyd writes, to "re-emerge[] within him," "the buried past . . . forced back to the surface once more" (1990: 550–1). A wistful Dickens composed an "autobiographical fragment," which he sent to Forster "just before *Copperfield*" (1990: 551). Forster was eventually able "to separate the fact from the fiction," but he was struck by how "many passages in *Copperfield* . . . are literally true" (1900: 24, 9). Dickens's tragicomic depictions of dinner-table embarrassment, of food-related and consumption-themed trauma, of *want*, serve a therapeutic and confessional purpose. "He had reached a point," Ackroyd conjectures, "where the episode of his childhood humiliation could remain his own 'secret' no longer" (1990: 551). Thus, Dickens exposes his weakness and insecurity for all to see, couching his trauma in self-deprecating laughter, making a mockery of the self-consciousness—of the class consciousness—that had once tormented him. Shame is his target, and shame is his weapon.

Dickens's journey to shame, to coming to terms with it, does not begin with his alter ego in *David Copperfield*. Seven years earlier, when the stakes are lower, he pokes fun at his embarrassment and mealtime dread in *American Notes*, in which he *is* himself, or rather a carefully curated representation of himself. Dickens's authorial persona in *American Notes* is that of a frustrated tourist, but with a Swiftian twist: a Gulliver-like Englishman trapped in a world of humanoid beasts. Dickens's account of his travels in America includes a series of uncomfortable scenes at table, sometimes "at rather uncomfortable hours" (1987: 219), where American vulgarity, lack of sociability, and his acute self-consciousness mar the meal for him. "There is no conversation," he notes, "no laughter, no cheerfulness, no sociality, except in spitting; and that is done in silent fellowship round the stove" (1987: 158). American meals have a way of reducing participants to material bodies—and in the United States, a slave-owning society, the human body is already a dehumanized thing. Americans are slaves to their mouths. Dickens watches in horror as diners "suck their knives

and forks meditatively, until they have decided what to take next” from the serving vessel, “then pull them out of their mouths: put them in the dish; help themselves; and fall to work again” (1987: 158). He feels his own mouth assaulted: “This preposterous forcing of unpleasant drinks down the reluctant throats of travellers is not at all uncommon in America” (1987: 191).

I really dreaded the coming of the hour that summoned us to table; and was as glad to escape from it again, as if it had been a penance or a punishment. Healthy cheerfulness and good spirits forming a part of the banquet, I could soak my crusts in the fountain with Le Sage’s strolling player, and revel in their glad enjoyment: but sitting down with so many fellow-animals to ward off thirst and hunger as a business; to empty, each creature, his Yahoo’s trough as quickly as he can, and then slink sullenly away; to have these social sacraments stripped of everything but the mere greedy satisfaction of the natural cravings; goes so against the grain with me, that I seriously believe the recollection of these funeral feasts will be a waking nightmare to me all my life.

—1987: 170

At table, Dickens is Gulliver. The Americans are Yahoos, the “odious animal” that embodies what Swift finds “degenerate and brutal” in human nature (1991: 252, 254). The problem, however, is that Dickens has no Houyhnhnm host to separate him physically and morally from the Yahoo herd, to nurture his critical detachment, to reassure him that “I differed indeed from other Yahoos” (Swift 1991: 257). This is what traumatizes Dickens. Swift’s scatological view of beastly humans is softened significantly, in *American Notes*, through the expedient of Dickens’s having to share the trough with them. Sentimental satire implicates the satirist in a way that Menippean satire does not, for cracks appear in the satiric wall “between perceiver and perceived” (Martin 1974: 29).

So thin are the walls on the riverboat, that Dickens can hear the man in the next cabin chatting with his wife about *him*, as “if he had leaned on my shoulder, and whispered me: ‘Boz is on board still, my dear’” or “I suppose *that* Boz will be writing a book by-and-by, and putting all our names in it!” (1987: 199). Narrator is stalked by object of narration. What turns a merely unpleasant meal into a “waking nightmare” is Dickens’s awareness that he too is watched. At table, he is a self-conscious participant, a self-pitying victim, rather than an omniscient narrator or picaresque *flâneur*, or the charming urban anthropologist with whom readers fell in love in *Sketches by Boz*. In *American Notes*, Dickens’s snobbish self-regard and capacity for shame make him the butt of his own satiric joke. On one level, *American Notes* is a satire on American vulgarity and materialism, a satire so brutal, in fact, that it alienated many of his American fans. But *American Notes* also represents Dickens’s first sustained attempt at

confessional or self-flagellating satire, at depicting himself as a failed Swift, as a satirist hoisted with his own middle-class petard. Self-flagellation is not the same thing as self-deprecation, and embarrassment is not necessarily comical. In his somber journalistic writings of the 1850s and 1860s, Dickens presents his embarrassment and shame—in the face of human degradation and urban squalor—as symptoms of and potential cures to his bourgeois insularity, as spurs to social reform. One sees this in “On Duty with Inspector Field” (1851) and, after 1860, in the series of articles comprising *The Uncommercial Traveller*, published in Dickens’s own *All The Year Round*. In “Night Walks” (1860), for instance, Dickens confronts his own externalized shame—the consequences of his capitalist success—in the faces of “houseless” people: “people who have no other object every night in the year” than “to get through the night” (2000b: 150–1). The poor might live like pigs on the streets, but the affluent have porcine appetites. Dickens’s capacity for self-critique, for shaming himself for embodying middle-class self-centeredness, was honed in the early 1840s in the satiric context of *American Notes*.

It will come as no surprise that, in *American Notes*, pig and its byproducts predominate. Pork, ham, roving pigs, streaky—and *streaking*—bacon are subthemes, metaphors for the grotesque materiality to which people are reduced in the New World. Famished Dickens happens upon village taverns where only “ham and coffee were procurable” (1987: 185). He struggles to decipher American menus, marveling at the fact that “chicken fixings” might refer to “broiled ham, sausages, veal cutlets, [or] steaks,” whereas “common doings” “includes only pork and bacon” (1987: 180). Pig is not only on every menu. Pigs are diners—some with a taste for man. In Ohio one night, a member of Dickens’s traveling party, “bitten beyond his power of endurance” by insects, flees the crude shelter for the stagecoach: “This was not a very politic step, as it turned out; for the pigs scenting him, and looking upon the coach as a kind of pie with some manner of meat inside, grunted round it so hideously, that he was afraid to come out again, and lay there shivering, till morning” (1987: 195–6). Here, the object of consumption attempts to consume the consumer.

Instances of table-side humiliation feature prominently in *David Copperfield* too, in which Dickens’s alter ego “loung[e] about the streets, insufficiently and unsatisfactorily fed” (1991: 161), a middle-class boy fallen on hard times. Wanting more from one’s dinner is a consistent theme in the novel. At one point, David mishears “sweethearts” as “sweetmeats” (1991: 64), projecting hunger onto his interlocutor and confessing by way of parapraxis that he needs love as much as calories. Beneath food-related awkwardness is trauma. The death of his mother, his abandonment, the fact that he works “from morning until night . . . with common men and boys” (1991: 161): these are the traumatic events that structure David’s shame at having to dine alone, ogled by working-class strangers. “What the waiter thought of such a strange little



FIGURE 8.4: “Phiz” (Hablot Knight Browne), “Our Housekeeping,” *David Copperfield*, 1850. Photo by Universal History Archive / Getty Images.

apparition coming in all alone,” David writes, in a scene plucked from Dickens’s own childhood, “I don’t know; but I can see him now, staring at me as I ate my dinner, and bringing up the other waiter to look. I gave him a halfpenny for himself, and I wish he hadn’t taken it” (1991: 160). Trauma is never stale; it comes in pangs of present tense. Hence, Dickens switches abruptly between past and present tenses in a sibling scene: “Here we stand, all three, before me now. The landlord in his shirt-sleeves; his wife looking over the little half-door; and I, in some confusion, looking up at them” (1991: 161).

In scenes of meal-time embarrassment, Dickens stands off to the side, a spectral presence. He is Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Past rolled into one. He observes his surrogate selves—David, Boz, or Pip—internalizing the gaze of the working class, American Yahoos, and myopic provincials, respectively. Dickens invites readers to identify with his surrogates on these self-conscious occasions, even as he satirizes their shame as a psychocultural symptom of middle-class insularity and egoism. Dickens risks himself to achieve this satiric effect. There is no ethics without risk. Where Swift directed his fire downward, from a perch of moral superiority, knowing better all the time, Dickens enters

the ethical fray: exposed as much as exposing. The aroma of bacon cannot be attributed solely to the chophouse or domestic setting of these scenes, for comedy and tragedy mingle in them. Dickens's sentimental brand of satire was not for everyone. By 1855, Trollope had had enough. In *The Warden* (1855), he satirizes Dickens's pathos-driven approach to social problems, accusing his rival novelist of opportunism and disingenuousness. When John Bold comes to the end of the latest number of Mr. Popular Sentiment's serialized novel, "he threw it aside," complaining "that the absurdly strong colouring of the picture would disenable the work from doing either good or harm" (1991: 149–50).

A cultural history of comedy cannot throw Dickens aside. In a century in which attitudes toward satire "hovered uneasily between extremes of proclaiming its virtues and worrying that it was inappropriate" (Martin 1974: 7), Dickens understood that the public ridicule intrinsic to satire must—if it were to continue to serve an ethical end—be internalized by the modern satirist as self-critique. Satire must catch a glimpse of itself in its own mirror. Shaming others only gets us so far in a middle-class world structured by politeness and self-consciousness, where shame is never in short supply. Satire's new mission, Dickens suggests, must be to wrestle earnestly with its own history of shame.

NOTES

Series Preface

1. Umberto ([1980] 1995), "The Comic and the Rule," in *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, 269–78, trans. William Weaver, London: Minerva.

Chapter One

1. These results are from searches conducted in the following databases: Readex's "America's Historical Newspapers," EBSCO's "AAS Historical Periodicals Collection," ProQuest's American Periodical Series, and the Library of Congress's Chronicling America.
2. Ryan Cordell uses the term "network author" to account for "the ways in which meaning and authority accrued to acts of circulation and aggregation across antebellum newspapers. This idea of a network author extends scholarly notions of reprinting, reauthorship, and the social text by identifying composition in terms of writers, editors, compositors, and readers enmeshed in reciprocal, mutually dynamic relationships of reception, interpretation, and remediation" (2015: 418).
3. Dorson 1939 offers a near-complete collection of sketches from the Crockett almanacs, organized by theme.
4. On women in the Crockett almanacs, see Lofaro 2001.
5. On *Spirit of the Times*, see Blair 1937: 82–5.
6. On "cracker-box philosophers" and "horse sense" as humorous devices, see Tandy 1925, Blair 1942, and Nickels 1993: 147–214.
7. On the lyceum movement in nineteenth-century America, see Bode 1968. On comedians and the lecture circuit, see Blair 1993: 34–6.
8. For more on Twain's writings and lectures on Hawai'i, see Frear 1947, Florence 1995, and Caron 2008.

9. On the predominance of pseudonyms in nineteenth-century American comic writing, see Bier 1968: 114.
10. For more on the Biglow poems in their newspaper contexts, see Thompson 2012 and Thompson and Showalter 2015.

Chapter Two

1. For an account of postmodernism's purported demise and a survey of attempts at describing what has followed it, see for example Kirby 2010: 42.
2. The American genesis of "deadpan" as a term and the transatlantic circulation of performers, companies, and genres during the century prior to its emergence provide the rationale for the framing of this chapter; however, as the Continental orientation of some of the comedy theory I discuss below suggests, I do not wish to suggest that the style had no European antecedents; French comedy and melodrama in particular influenced English comic genres during the period. The theory should be understood as part of the broader intellectual context in which deadpan emerged but not as explaining the case studies that follow.
3. John Morreall explains these theories in greater detail in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2016).
4. See Hutcheson 1750.
5. The late nineteenth-century edition I cite translates the title as *The World as Will and Idea*; in the text I refer to the version of the title more familiar in contemporary usage. All italics in quotations from this text in original.
6. The title of this book is also translated as *Practice in Christianity*. On earnestness in Kierkegaard's oeuvre, see Davenport 2014: 219–27; see also Williams 2018: 8–13.
7. Alexander Simpson played the Yankee role of "Jonathan Ploughboy" in 1825; his performance inspired the most famous stage Yankee, George Handel Hill (Northall 1850: 13; see also Collier 1958: 91 and Hodge 1964: 52). Hill played the role in 1832 at the Arch Street Theatre, Philadelphia (Hill 1853: 77).
8. Comic lectures including Stevens' proliferated in the eighteenth century and attained new heights of popularity thanks to Charles Mathews after 1818 (During 2004: 99). On Stevens' lecture, see Kahan 1984.
9. See Hill 1836; see also Hill 1840. On distinctions between Yankee and minstrel comic dialects, see Mahar 1985: 276.
10. It is difficult to date the first appearance of the interlocutor. Hans Nathan concludes, based on his study of the Harvard Theatre Collection's extensive archive of minstrel ephemera, that in the mid-1840s one of the endmen assumed the master of ceremonies role and that the interlocutor role developed from there (1962: 153). The *OED* dates the relevant definitions of "interlocutor" to 1880 and "middleman" to 1870 but here, as with many stage terms, it is belated.
11. During the twentieth century, popular myth held that the interlocutor did not appear in blackface, though Toll and Lott both conclude otherwise. Lott surmises that the "white interlocutor, at least in urban centers, appears to have been a later development" (1993: 264 n. 6).

12. Charles Lamb's account of Bannister praised the actor for ignoring the fourth wall, rather than acting within it, reflecting Lamb's own preference for "comedy acting grounded in the artificial rather than the illusionistic" (Davis 2015: 41). The divergent descriptions of Bannister's acting demonstrate the degree to which critical taste shapes theater history when we access it in this way. But as Jim Davis notes, "taking the key from the notion of romantic sociability, we will find not so much a consistent or coherent theory of comic acting arising from the criticism of Lamb, Leigh Hunt and Hazlitt, as an implicit on-going discussion" (2015: 41).
13. "A part or character that is constantly giving cues for another character to 'score off' or 'cannon off' is known as a 'feeder'" (*OED*, "feeder" 11). The *OED* dates this usage to 1886. (John S. Farmer's *Slang and its Analogues Past and Present* [1891: 380] similarly dates the theatrical definition of "feed"—"to prompt"—to 1883; it does not include the theatrical definition of "feeder.") The *OED* dates the use of "straight" in reference to "'serious' as opposed to popular or comic" theater to 1895 ("straight" 10a). It dates the vaudevillian "straight man," a term "applied to a performer who assumes a passive role as a feeder or butt for a comedian," to a *New York Times* article in 1923 (*OED*, "straight" 10b). However, in a 1912 *Theatre* interview, the Australian comedian Charlie Vaude (Charles Ridgway) referred to his partner and feeder, Bill Verne (Will Barrington), as a "straightman," and to "straightmen" as a type of comedian (Djupal 2015: n.p.). This example suggests the earlier international circulation of many of these terms.
14. V&A Theatre and Performance Collections. D'Oyly Carte Archive. *Trial by Jury* photographs, 1875–1960s. GB 71 THM/73/24/1. *The Sorcerer* photographs, 1877–1930. GB 71 THM/73/24/2.

Chapter Four

1. This does not, however, apply in Italy, where local languages or dialects proved more pervasive as part of municipal and regional identities, which also infused *varietà* performances with regionally specific elements drawing on older traditions (see De Matteis 2008). Anderson 1991 points to language as essential to the cultivation of nationalism, something much more easily achieved in France and Britain, which have long been unified politically and linguistically.
2. Coincidentally, Marie Lloyd's debut as a performer was part of a minstrel troupe as a child in 1879. She was not alone in beginning her career in blackface: Sophie Tucker, Mae West, and Fanny Brice all sang as "coon shouters" or performed in blackface during the late 1800s and early 1900s (S.D. 2006: 110).
3. Pan-American and British identification with the trope of the downtrodden figure in the industrial age can also be found with victims of the cult of individualism, capitalism, and the profiting of industry from exploitation of workers (see DePastino 2003).
4. Some performers, like Ned Harrigan, expanded their repertoires beyond a single nationality. While working on the Barbary Coast in San Francisco, he performed comic acts as Chinese, Swedish, and German characters (S.D. 2006: 49).

Chapter Five

1. In Plessner's view, laughter represents a "breakdown of the equilibrium between man and his physical existence" (1970: 65).
2. There are a number of such ballads. Hood may also be thinking of "Fair Margaret and Sweet William" in Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, where the dead Margaret appears to her lover to reproach him with faithlessness.

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